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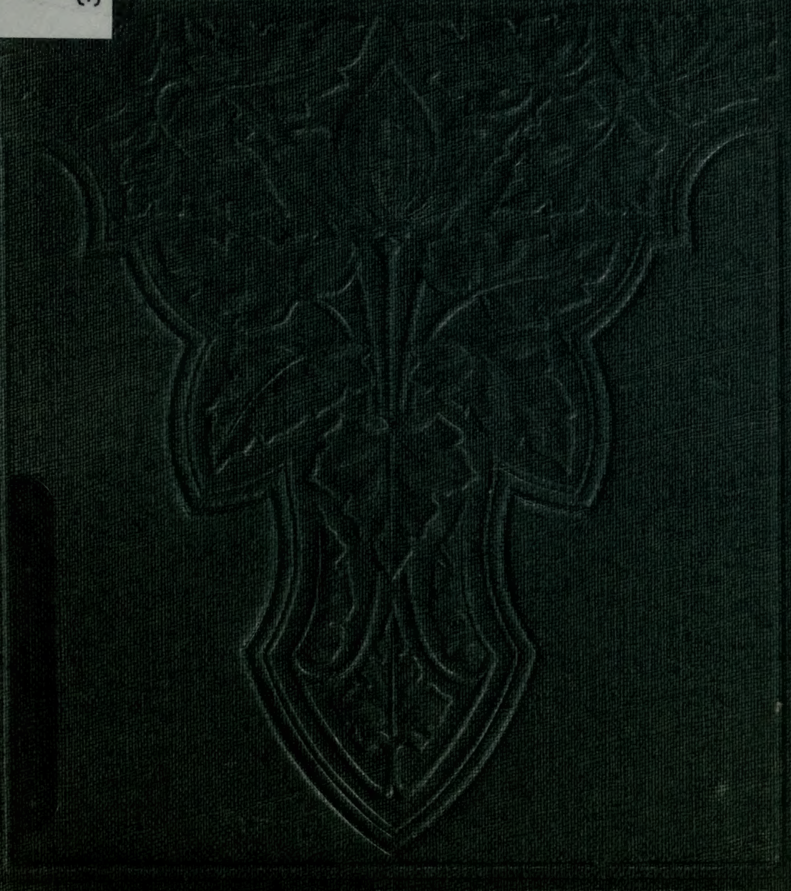

MANASSEH

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"OUT OF THE MYSTERIOUS DEPTHS OF THE FIREPLACE STEPPED THE WHITE-CLAD FORM OF A WOMAN."—P. 112.

Manasseh.]

Manasseh

A Story of the Stirring Days of '48

BY

MAURUS JÓKAI

AUTHOR OF "THE BARON'S SONS," ETC.

London and Felling-on-Tyne
THE WALTER SCOTT PUBLISHING CO., LD.
NEW YORK: 3 EAST 14TH STREET

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MANASSEH

CHAPTER I.

FELLOW-TRAVELLERS.

OUR story opens in an Italian railway station, in the spring of 1848. From a train that had just arrived, the passengers were hastening to secure their places in another that stood waiting for them. A guard had succeeded in crowding a party of two ladies and a gentleman into one of these itinerant prison-cells, which already contained seven occupants, before the newcomers perceived that they were being imposed upon. A vigorous protest followed. The elder of the two ladies, seizing the guard by the arm, addressed him in an angry tone, first in German, then in French.

With the calm indifference of an automaton, the uniformed official pointed to a placard against the wall. *Per dieci persone* was the inscription it bore. Ten persons, it seemed, were expected to find places here.

"But we have first-class tickets," protested the lady, producing a bit of yellow pasteboard in proof of her assertion.

The guard glanced at it with as little interest as he would have bestowed on a scarab from the tomb of the Pharaohs. Shrugging his shoulders, he merely indicated, with a wave of his hand, places where the three passengers might, perhaps, find seats, — one in this corner, a second yonder, and, if its owner would kindly transfer a greasy bundle to his lap, a third over there.

This arrangement, however, was not at all to the liking of either the ladies or their escort. The latter was altogether disinclined to accept a seat between two fat cattle-dealers, being of no meagre dimensions himself.

"We'll see about this!" he exclaimed, and left the compartment in quest of the station-master.

That dignitary was promenading the platform in military uniform, his hands behind his back. The complainant began to explain the situation to him and to demand that consideration to which his first-class ticket entitled him. But the *illustrissimo* merely opened his eyes and surveyed the gentleman in silence, much as a cuttlefish might have done if similarly addressed.

"*Partenza-a-a!*" shouted the guards, in warning.

The indignant gentleman hurried back to his compartment, only to find that, in his absence, three additional passengers had been squeezed into the crowded quarters, so that he himself now raised the total to thirteen, — a decidedly unlucky number. The ladies were in despair, and their attendant had begun to express his mind vigorously in his native Hungarian, when he felt himself touched on the elbow from behind, and heard a voice accosting him, in the same tongue.

"My fellow-countryman, don't heat yourself. Not eloquence, but backsheesh, is needed here. While you were wasting your breath I had a guard open for me a reserved first-class compartment. It cost me but a trifle, and if you and your ladies choose to share it with me, it is at your service."

"Thank you," was the reply, "but we shall not have time to change; we had only two minutes here in all."

"Never fear," rejoined the stranger, reassuringly. "The *due minute* is a mere form with which to frighten the inexperienced. The train won't start for half an hour yet."

The two ladies were no less grateful to their deliverer than was Andromeda of old to the gallant Perseus. They gladly accepted the comfortable seats offered them, while their escort took a third, leaving the fourth for their benefactor, who lingered outside to finish his cigar. At the second ringing of the bell, he gave his half-smoked Havana to a passing porter, mounted the running-board of the moving train, and entered his compartment.

Seating himself, the young man removed his travelling-cap and revealed a broad, arched forehead, surmounted by a luxuriant growth of hair. Thick eyebrows, bright blue eyes, and a Greek nose were the striking characteristics of his face, which seemed to combine the peculiarities of so many types and races, that an observer would have been at a loss to classify it.

The other gentleman of the party was of genuine Hungarian stock, stout in figure and ruddy of countenance, with a pointed moustache, which he constantly twirled. The younger of the two ladies was veiled, so that only the graceful outlines of a face, evidently classic in its modelling, were revealed to the eye. But the elder had thrown back her veil, exposing to full view an honest, round face, blond hair, lively eyes, and lips that manifestly found it irksome to maintain that silence which good breeding imposes in the presence of a stranger.

The ladies' escort was a very uneasy travelling companion. First he complained that he could not sit with his back toward the engine, as he was sure to be car-sick. The young stranger accordingly changed places with him. Then he found fault with his new seat, because it was exposed to a draught which blew the cinders into his eyes. Thereupon the young man promptly volunteered to close the window for him; but this only made matters worse, for fresh air was indispensable. At this, the blond lady gave up her place to the gentleman, and he, at last, appeared satisfied. Not so, however, the lady herself; she was now seated opposite the stranger, to whom she and her companions were so greatly indebted, and the feeling of indebtedness is always somewhat irksome.

Women on a journey are inclined to regard a stranger's approach with some suspicion, and to be ever on the alert against adventurers. A vague mistrust of this sort concerning the young stranger may have been aroused by the mere fact that, Hungarian though his language indicated him to be, he and the ladies' escort indulged in no interchange of courtesies so natural among fellow-countrymen meeting by chance in a foreign land. Nevertheless the blond lady strove to assume an air that, on her part, should signify an entire absence of interest in all things relating to her *vis-à-vis*. Even when the sun shone in her face and annoyed her, she seemed determined to adjust the window-shade without any help from the stranger, until he courteously prevailed on her to accept his aid.

"Oh, what helpless creatures we women are!" she exclaimed as she sank back into her seat.

"You have yourselves to blame for it," was the other's rejoinder.

If he had simply offered some vapid compliment, protesting, for example, that women were by no means helpless creatures, but, on the contrary, the rulers of the stronger sex, and so of the world,—then she would have merely smiled sarcastically and relapsed into silence; but there was something like a challenge in his unexpected retort.

"*Par exemple?*" she rejoined, with an involuntary show of interest.

"For example," he continued, "a lady voluntarily surrenders the comfortable seat assigned to her, and exchanges with a man who occupies an uncomfortable one."

The lady coloured slightly. "A free initiative," said she, "is seldom possible with a woman. She is ever subject to a stronger will."

"Yet she need not be," was the reply; "with the fascination which she exerts over men she is in reality the stronger."

"Ah, yes; but suppose that fascination is employed over a man by women that have no right thus to use their power?"

"Then the legitimate possessor of that right is still at fault. If fascination is the bond by which the man can be held, why does she not make use of it herself? A face of statuesque beauty that knows not how to smile has often been the cause of untold unhappiness."

At these words the younger of the two ladies threw back her veil, perhaps to gain a better view of the speaker, and thus revealed just such a face as the young man had referred to, — a face with large blue eyes and silent lips.

"Would you, then," the elder lady continued the discussion with some warmth, "have a wife employ the wiles of a coquette toward her own husband, in order to retain his love?"

"I see no reason why she should not if circumstances demand it."

"Very good. But you must admit that a wife is something more than a sweetheart; maternal duties and cares also enter into her life, and when, by reason of her exalted mission as a mother, anxieties and fears will, in spite of her, depict themselves on her face, what then becomes of your pretty theory?"

The attack was becoming too warm for the young stranger, and he hastened to capitulate with a good grace. "In that case, madam," he admitted, "the husband is bound to show his wife nothing but the purest devotion and affection. The Roman lictors were, by the consul's orders, required to lower their fasces before a Roman matron; she was undisputed mistress in her sphere. The man who refuses to render the humblest of homage to the mother of his children deserves to have a millstone hung about his neck and to be cast into the sea."

The blond lady seemed softened by this unconditional surrender. "Are you on your way to Rome, may I ask?" she presently inquired, her question being apparently suggested by the other's reference to ancient Roman customs.

"Yes, that is my destination," he replied.

"You go to witness the splendid ceremonies of Holy Week, I infer."

"No; they do not interest me."

"What!" exclaimed the lady; "the sublimest of our Church observances, that which symbolises the very divinity of our Saviour, does not interest you?"

"No; because I do not believe in his divinity," was the calm reply.

The lady raised her eyebrows in involuntary token of surprise at this most unexpected answer. She suddenly felt a strong desire to fathom the mysterious stranger. "I believe the Vatican is seeking an unusually large loan just now," she remarked, half-interrogatively.

The stranger could not suppress a smile. He read the other's surmise that he might be of Hebrew birth and faith. "It is not the papal loan, madam," he returned, "that takes me to Rome; it is a divorce case."

"A divorce case?" The blond lady could not disguise her interest at these words, while even the statuesque beauty at the other end of the compartment turned her face fully upon the speaker, and her lips parted slightly, like the petals of an opening rosebud.

"Yes," resumed the young man, "a separation from one who has denied and rejected me for the sake of another; one whom I must for ever shun in the future, and yet cannot cease to love; one whose loss can never be made good to me. I am going to Rome because it is a dead city and belongs equally to all and to none."

The train halted at a station, and the young man alighted. After a few words to the guard he disappeared from sight.

"Do you know that gentleman?" asked the blond lady of her escort.

"Very well," was the reply.

"And yet you two hardly exchanged a word."

"Because we were neither of us so disposed."

"Are you enemies?"

"Not enemies, and yet in a certain sense opponents."

"Is he a Jew or an atheist?"

"Neither; he is a Unitarian."

"And what is a Unitarian, pray tell me?"

"The Unitarians form one of the recognised religious sects of Hungary," explained the man. "They are Christians who believe in the unity of God."

"It is strange I never heard of them before," said the lady.

"They live chiefly in Transylvania," added the other; "but the great body of them, taken the world over, are found in England and America, where they possess considerable influence. Their numbers are not large, but they hold together well; and, though they are not increasing rapidly, they are not losing ground."

The younger lady lowered her veil again and crossed herself beneath its folds; but her companion turned and looked out of the window with a curious desire to scrutinise the wicked heretic more closely. Both the ladies, as the reader will have conjectured, were strictly orthodox in their faith.

The train soon started again, after the customary ringing and whistling and the guards' repeated warning of "*partenza!*" But the young heretic seemed to put as little faith in bells and whistles and verbal warnings as in the dogma of the Trinity; for he failed to appear as the train moved away from the station. The ladies who owed so much to his kindness could not deny a certain feeling of relief at being freed from the company of one who cherished such heterodox religious convictions.

"You say you are well acquainted with the young man?" the blond lady resumed.

"Yes, I know him well enough," was the answer. "His name is Manasseh Adorjan, he is of good old Szekler descent, and he has seven brothers and a twin sister. They all live at home in their ancestral castle. Some of the brothers have married, but all live together peacefully under one roof and form one household. Manasseh seems to have been recognised by the family as the gifted one, — his brothers are nothing more than honest and intelligent Szeklers, — and for his education and advancement in the world all worked in unison. When he was only twenty years old this young genius became a candidate for the council. In Transylvania it is the custom to make the higher government appointments from all four of the recognised religious sects, — Roman Catholic, Calvinist, Lutheran, and Unitarian. From that time dates our mutual hostility."

"Then you are enemies, after all."

"In politics, yes. However, I must not bore you ladies with political questions. Suffice it to say, then, in regard to Manasseh Adorjan, that a sudden change of government policy, and the defeat of his party, gave the young man a fall from his proud eminence and led him to turn his back, for a time at least, on his native land; for he scorned to seek the preferment that was so easily within his reach by renouncing his principles and joining the opposite party."

"Now I understand," interposed the blond lady, "what he meant by his 'divorce case,' and his parting with one who had denied and rejected him, but whom he could never cease to love. Those were his words, and they referred to his country."

"Yes, probably," assented the other; "for the young man is unmarried."

At the next station the subject of this conversation suddenly reappeared.

"Ah, we thought you were lost," exclaimed the elder of the two ladies, with a not unfriendly smile.

"Oh, no, not lost," returned Manasseh; "what belongs nowhere and to no one cannot be lost. I merely took a seat on the imperial. Come, friend Gabriel," — turning to the ladies' escort, — "will you not join me there? The view is really fine, and we can smoke also."

The one thus familiarly addressed, and whose name was Gabriel Zimandy, accepted the invitation after a moment's demur. The ladies were left to themselves.

CHAPTER II.

A LIFE'S HAPPINESS AT STAKE.

"A SPLENDID country this!" exclaimed Gabriel Zimandy, when he had lighted his meerschaum and found himself at leisure to survey the landscape. "Too bad the Austrians have their grip on it!"

"Look here," interposed Manasseh, "suppose we steer clear of politics. Do you agree?"

"Did I say anything about politics?" retorted Gabriel. "I merely alluded to the beautiful view. Well, then, we'll talk about beautiful women if you prefer. You little know what a tender spot you touched upon with the ladies. I refer to the brunette — not to the blond, with whom you were talking."

"Ah, is the other a brunette? I did not get a good look at her."

"But she got a good look at you, while you were discussing the duties of women toward their husbands, the subject of divorce, and Heaven knows what else besides."

"And did I awaken any unpleasant reminiscences?" asked the young man.

"Not in the bosom of your fair antagonist, — she is already a widow, — but in that of her companion, who sat silent and listened to all you said. She is on her way to Rome to petition the Pope to annul her marriage."

"Is that so!" exclaimed Manasseh, in surprise. "I should have said she was just out of a convent where she had been placed to be educated."

"What eyes you have! Even without looking at her you have guessed her age to a month, I'll warrant! She is my client, the unfortunate Princess Cagliari, *née* Countess Blanka Zboroy. You know the family: their estates are entailed, so that all but the eldest son have to shift for themselves as best they can. The younger sons go into the army or the Church, and the daughters are wedded to rich husbands, or else they take the veil. But it so happened that once upon a time a rich bishop belonging to this family made a will directing that his property be allowed to accumulate until it became large enough to provide a snug fortune of a million florins for each of his relatives; and this end was recently realised. But by the terms of the will, the heirs are allowed only the usufruct of this legacy, and, furthermore, even that is to be forfeited under certain circumstances, as for example, if allegiance be refused to the reigning dynasty, or if the legatee renounce the Roman Catholic faith, or, in the case of a woman, lead an unchaste life. Any part of the estate thus forfeited goes to the remaining legatees in an equal division, and so you can imagine what a sharp watch the several beneficiaries under this will keep over one another. A million is no bagatelle; the game is worth the candle. But to come back to our starting-point, Countess Blanka was joined in marriage with Prince Cagliari as soon as she left the convent. You must know the prince, at least by reputation; he plays no small part in the political world."

"I have met him several times," replied Manasseh.

"At court balls in Vienna, doubtless," said the advocate; "for, old as Cagliari is, he still turns night into day and burns the candle at both ends. When he married Countess Blanka he was very intimate with the Marchioness Caldariva, formerly known to lovers of the ballet as 'the beautiful Cyrene.' She practised the terpsichorean art with such success that one day she danced into favour with an Italian marquis who honoured her with the gift of his name and rank, after which he shot himself. The marchioness now owns a splendid palace in Vienna, a present from Prince Cagliari, who, they say, forgot to deliver up the key to her when he married Countess Blanka. It is even whispered that the marchioness herself tied the bridegroom's cravat for him on his wedding-day. Well, however that may be, the prince took the young lady to wife, much as a rich man buys a horse of rare breed, or a costly statue, or any other high-priced curiosity. But the poor bride could not endure her husband's presence. She was only a child, and, up to the day of her marriage, had no conception of the real meaning of matrimony. The prince has never enjoyed a moment's happiness with his young wife. His very first attempt to offer her a husband's caresses caused her to turn deadly pale and go into convulsions; and this occurred as often as the two were left alone. The prince complained of his hard lot, and sought medical advice. It was reported that the young wife was subject to epileptic attacks. A man of any delicacy would have accepted the situation and held his peace; but the prince took counsel of his factotum, a certain Benjamin Vajdar — "

An involuntary movement, and a half-suppressed exclamation on Manasseh's part, made the speaker turn to him inquiringly; then, as the other said nothing, he resumed:

"This factotum is the evil genius of the family, and the two together make a pair hard to match. The prince has obstinacy, sensuality, arrogance, and vindictiveness; and his tool has brains, cunning, and inventiveness, for the effective exercise of the other's evil tendencies. Cagliari finally went back to the beautiful Cyrene for consolation; but she was bent on proving her power over him, and at her bidding he heaped all sorts of indignities upon his innocent and helpless wife. At last, to crown all, he instituted divorce proceedings against her. This was the price he paid to regain the fair Cyrene's favour, but I am convinced that Benjamin Vajdar is at the bottom of it all. The prince bases his suit for a separation on his wife's alleged epileptic attacks and consequent unfitness for the wedded state. Of course that is all nonsense. I am not an epileptic, nor wont to bite or scratch people; but I can't approach this Cagliari without experiencing a sort of foaming at the mouth and a twitching of the muscles, as if I must pitch into the man, tooth and nail. My view of the case is that my client finds her husband's attentions so abhorrent that she even swoons when he offers to kiss her; and so I am going to apply for a total dissolution of the marriage, for if the other side win their case the papal edict will forbid a second marriage on the wife's part. And just imagine a young girl like her, in the first bloom of youth, scarcely twenty years old, compelled to renounce all hope of wedded happiness. We are now on our way to Rome to see whether my fair client's personal appeal may not avail somewhat with her judges. They cannot but take pity on her if their hearts are human. Prince Cagliari has of late lost favour at the Vatican, and all the conditions are in our favour; but there is one man whom I fear, — that cool and crafty Vajdar.'

I fell in with him in Venice, and asked him whither he was going. 'To Milan,' said he, but I knew he lied. He, too, is bound for Rome, and he will be there ahead of us, or at least overtake us. If we could only reach Rome first, I am confident we should win the game. But I fear he may be on this very train. Why, how warm you look! The perspiration stands in drops on your forehead. Does my pipe annoy you? No? Well, as I was saying, I suspect the fellow is on this train with us, and if he falls into my hands I'll wring his miserable neck! He thinks he's going to ruin the young life of my client and bury her alive, does he? We'll see about that."

"He shall not do it!" exclaimed the other, with emphasis.

"Good for you, my friend! And if you can propose some scheme for balking him, I'll take my hat off to you. Tell me, now, how can the princess make sure of outwitting her foes, and so escape the horrible fate of being buried alive?"

"She can turn Protestant, and then the Church of Rome will have no claim whatever on her."

"Very good, but how about the million florins left her as a good Catholic by the bishop?"

Manasseh Adorjan crumbled his cigar in his fingers. "If the princess has a woman's heart in her bosom," he declared, "she will throw her million away in return for the love of a true man."

CHAPTER III.

AN INTRUDER EXPELLED.

MEANWHILE the train had reached another station, a junction where a halt was made for refreshments, pending the arrival of a connecting train. The advocate was hungry, and accordingly made his way to the dining-room, being first warned by his companion to use despatch, as otherwise, on returning to the ladies, he might find his compartment filled.

"And what will you do meantime?" asked Gabriel.

"I have my sketch-book with me," replied Manasseh, "and I am going to draw the view from my perch up here."

"Ah, I did not know you were an artist."

"Yes, I am an artist, and nothing more."

Upon the arrival of the connecting train and the ensuing scramble for seats, the ladies of our little party felt some anxiety lest their privacy should be rudely broken in upon by unwelcome strangers. Princess Cagliari bent forward and looked down the platform, but immediately drew back again. Too late, however; she had been seen; and a moment afterward a young man, of sleek and comely appearance, immaculately dressed, and carrying in one hand a small cane whose peculiar head betrayed the fact that it concealed a rapier, sprang lightly on the footboard and entered the compartment.

"Ah, what an unexpected pleasure, Princess!" he exclaimed by way of greeting, lifting his hat and appropriating the corner seat opposite her.

"Pardon me," said Blanka, "but that seat is engaged. The gentleman who is with us — "

"Why, then, didn't he leave something — coat, or umbrella, or hand-bag — in proof of his claim to the seat?" interrupted the intruder. "The seat is now mine by railway usage, and I cannot deny myself the pleasure of sitting opposite you, my dear princess."

Blanka controlled her indignation as best she could, but her companion felt called upon to come to her aid with an energetic remonstrance.

"Mr. Vajdar," said she, severely, "you should know what is expected of a gentleman in his conduct toward a lady. You are well aware that the princess cannot endure your presence, nor are you ignorant of the reason."

The handsome young man drew a gilt pasteboard box from his side pocket, removed the cover, and offered the contents to the last speaker. "Madam Dormandy, you are fond of sweets. Permit me to solicit your acceptance of these caramels. They are freshly made, and are really excellent."

But Madam Dormandy turned her back disdainfully on the peace-offering and looked anxiously out of the window. "Where can Mr. Zimandy be all this time?" she murmured, impatiently.

"How long will you continue to dog my steps?" asked the princess, addressing the intruder in a voice that trembled with passion.

"Only to the grave," was the smiling reply; "there we shall separate — you to enter the gates of paradise, where I despair of gaining admission."

"But what reason have you for wishing my ruin?"

"Because you yourself will have it so. Have I ever made any secret of my designs or of my motives?"

"Are you determined to make me leave this compartment?"

"You would gain nothing by so doing," was Vajdar's cool retort. "I could not possibly forego the pleasure of your company, in whatever way you might choose to continue your journey."

"What is your purpose in all this?" demanded Blanka.

"To make you either as happy as a man can make a woman, or as wretched as only the devil himself can render a human being."

"I defy you to do either."

"Futile defiance! The game is in my hands, and I can make you as one buried alive."

"God will never allow such an iniquity!" cried the princess.

"Ah, my dear madam, you forget that we are on our way to Rome, where there are churches by the score, but no God."

Blanka shuddered in spite of herself, and drew her shawl more closely about her, while her foe crossed one leg over the other and smiled self-complacently.

The warning cry "*partenza!*" sounded along the platform, and the ladies' escort came running in alarm from the dining-room and sought his compartment.

"Have I your seat, sir?" coolly inquired Benjamin Vajdar of the man who had so lately promised to wring his neck.

"Oh, no, certainly not," mumbled the doughty advocate, in considerable surprise and confusion, as he caught his breath and meekly looked around for a vacant place.

A lightning-flash from the blond beauty's eyes and a mocking smile from the dandy rewarded this courteous forbearance. But the mocking smile changed the next instant to a sudden expression of disquiet, if not of actual fear. Manasseh Adorjan stood in the doorway, and Blanka noted a swift interchange of glances between the young men, like the flashing of two drawn swords.

"That place is already engaged, sir," said Manasseh, quietly.

Benjamin Vajdar's face flushed quickly, and then as suddenly paled. In his eyes one could have read rage, hate, and fear, and his right hand clutched the head of his cane convulsively, as if about to draw the weapon therein concealed. But Manasseh still stood regarding him fixedly, and the intruder yielded without a word. Taking up his satchel, he left the compartment. The whole scene had occupied but a moment. What was it that gave one of these men such power over the other, like that of a lion-tamer over his charge?

Manasseh himself took the vacated seat, without offering it to the advocate, and sat looking out of the window as long as Vajdar was in sight. At length the train started, and as it soon entered on a stretch of monotonous, waste territory, Blanka yielded to the drowsy lullaby of the smoothly rolling wheels, and fell asleep. Once or twice she half opened her eyes and was vaguely conscious that the young stranger opposite her was drawing something in the sketch-book that lay open on his knee. She pushed her veil still farther back from face and brow, hardly aware what she was doing, and again fell asleep.

CHAPTER IV.

A BIT OF STRATEGY.

A SHARP whistle from the locomotive awakened the sleepers.

"Where are we now?" asked Blanka.

"Near Bologna," answered the artist, who alone had remained awake; "and there I have to leave the train, which continues on, via Imola, to Ancona."

"You leave the train? But I thought you, too, were going to Rome," said the princess, in surprise.

"So I am," was the reply, "but by another route. My luggage will go through to Ancona, and thence by diligence to Rome, while I push on over the Apennines to Pistoja and Florence. It is a harder road, but its splendid views amply repay one for an occasional climb on foot by the *vetturino's* side; and then, too, I shall reach Rome one day ahead of you, who go by way of Ancona."

Blanka listened with interest. "Couldn't we take that route also?" she asked. "What do you say to it, Maria? We could quietly leave the train at Bologna and let our trunks go on to Rome without us."

"But are the mountain passes safe?" queried Madam Dormandy, turning to Manasseh. "Is there no danger of highwaymen?"

"Bad men are to be feared everywhere," replied the young man; "but as for highway robbers, they are much more to be apprehended by those travelling with valises and trunks than by the tourist that simply carries a satchel slung over his shoulder, as I intend to do. In my student days I used to tramp over these mountains in every direction, and the brigands never molested me. Whenever I fell in with a band I used to group the men together and sketch them. Artists have nothing to fear from gentlemen of the road."

"And besides, we are two able-bodied men, and I always carry a brace of pistols — don't you?" spoke up the advocate, his professional zeal kindling at the prospect of stealing a march on the enemy.

"I carry no weapons of any kind," calmly replied the artist.

"Oh, I fear no harm from bad men," exclaimed the princess; "there is but one bad man whom we need to dread."

The others easily guessed to whom she referred; but Gabriel Zimandy was bent on making her meaning still plainer.

"He'd better not follow us into the mountains!" he cried, "for if the young rogue falls into my hands he'll wish he'd never been born. Lucky for him he took our friend's gentle hint; had he kept his seat a moment longer there would have been serious trouble."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Madam Dormandy; "how surprised he will be when he fails to find us at Ancona and is obliged to journey on by diligence with our baggage, but without us!"

"We shall be hurrying on ahead of him over these grand old mountains," added the princess, with enthusiasm, her cheeks glowing in pleased anticipation. "And we have to thank you, Mr. Adorjan, for the suggestion." With an impulsive movement she extended her hand to the young artist, who scarcely ventured to touch her finger-tips in return.

"Very well, then," said he, "we will try the mountain road; and let us take no luggage but what we can carry in our hands. When we come to a beautiful waterfall we will sketch it, and when we chance upon a fine view we will celebrate its beauties in song."

"Yes, and people will take us for strolling minstrels," interposed the princess; "and we must drop our real names and titles. Mr. Zimandy shall be the impresario, and Madam Dormandy the prima-donna; they can pass for husband and wife. We two can be brother and sister. What is your sister's name?"

"Anna."

"Lend me her name for a little while, will you? You don't object?"

Manasseh turned strangely sober. "It would be only for your sake that I should object," he replied. "The bearer of that name is a very unfortunate girl."

So they agreed to leave the train at Bologna and take the mountain pass. It only remained to hoodwink Benjamin Vajdar, and Manasseh Adorjan promised to effect this. He alighted before the train had fairly stopped, having first directed the others to go into the waiting-room. "That young man will not stir from his seat, nor will he even look out of the window," added Manasseh, with as much confidence as if he had acquired a talisman which enabled him to control the other's actions.

As the train rolled out of the station the artist rejoined his party, with the welcome assurance that their enemy was now out of their way.

"Is there a mysterious relation of some sort between you two?" asked Blanka.

"Yes — one of fear: I tremble every time I see the man."

"You tremble?"

"Yes; I am afraid I shall kill him some day."

With that, and as if regretting that he had said so much, he hurried away to engage a carriage to take them to Vergato. During his absence the advocate explained to his client that the Unitarians have an especial horror of bloodshed. He declared that some of them shrank from taking even an animal's life and abstained entirely from the use of meat.

Blanka shook her head incredulously. She could not conceive of a gentleman's being forbidden by his scruples to use arms when the occasion demanded. How else, she asked, could he defend his honour, his loved ones, the women entrusted to his charge?

When the four were seated in their carriage, the gentlemen facing the ladies, Blanka led the conversation back to the point at which Manasseh had dropped it.

"You said you feared you should kill that young man some day," she began. "Does your religion forbid you to kill a man — under any circumstances?"

"With a single exception," he replied; "but that exception is out of the question in this instance."

Blanka wondered what the single exception could be, but refrained from asking. "Are you well acquainted with Mr. Vajdar?" she inquired presently.

"We have known each other from childhood," was the reply. "Whatever I possessed was shared with him. His father was my father's steward; and when the steward proved false to his trust and gambled away a large sum of money committed to his care, and then shot himself, my father adopted the little orphan, and always treated him exactly as he did his own children. He grew up to be a bright and promising young man, and never failed to win a stranger's favour and confidence. But woe to those that thus confided in him! My poor sister, my dear, good little Anna, trusted him, and all was ready for their wedding when he disappeared, deserting her at the very altar."

Even the shades of approaching nightfall could not hide the expression of pain on the speaker's face.

"When did this occur?" asked Blanka, gently.

"Last year — in February."

"The date of my marriage, and of my first seeing that man," was Blanka's silent comment. She pondered the possible connection between the two circumstances. Benjamin Vajdar had left his affianced bride soon after seeing Princess Cagliari; he had then entered Cagliari's service as private secretary, and, a little later, divorce proceedings had been begun by the prince against his young wife.

"Was it Mr. Vajdar's troubled conscience that made him leave us the moment you appeared?" she asked, after a pause.

"No," said Manasseh; "he has no conscience. When he has an object in view, all means are legitimate with him. He knows neither consideration for others nor shame for his own misdeeds."

"And yet he certainly played the coward before you."

"Because he knows that I possess certain information, certain documentary evidence, by which, if I chose, I could hurl him down in confusion and disgrace from any height, however lofty, which he might succeed in attaining."

"And you refrain from using this evidence against him?"

"To use it would be revenge," replied the young man, calmly.

"Is revenge forbidden where you live?"

"Yes."

"Has your sister never found a balm for her wounded affections?"

"Never. My people are of the kind that loves but once."

"Pray tell me where it is that your people have their home," urged the princess. "Is it on an island in the moon?"

"Indeed, princess, it is not unlike those glimpses of the moon that we get through a large telescope when we examine, for instance, the rocky island known to astronomers as 'Plutarch,' or that named 'Copernicus.' Everything where I live would seem to you to savour of another planet. On the maps the place is put down as 'Toroczko.' It is in a mountain gorge, entered by a narrow path along the riverside and through a cleft in the rocks. The northern side of this narrow ravine, being in some measure exposed to the southern sun, is clothed with woods; the southern is a great wall of bare rock rising in terraces, or giant steps, that might well suggest the dreariness and desolation of a landscape in the moon. This barren expanse of naked rock is called the Szekler Stone, and was formerly surmounted by the castle of a Hungarian vice-voivode. Its ruins are still to be seen there. The lower slopes of this mountainside are cultivated now, and the ploughshare is gradually forcing one terrace after another to yield sustenance to the farmer. Thus it is that by these cultivated terraces the centuries of the town's history can be numbered. For there is a village there, deep down in the rocky ravine, as if on the floor of a volcano's crater, and in that village live the happiest people in all the world. Do not think me unduly prejudiced by the fact that I am one of them. No, I am not prejudiced. Strangers also find no terms of praise too high for those happy and industrious people. Noted English and German travellers have visited my native valley and afterward written books about it, as other travellers have about Japan or Circassia. Indeed, those two countries have something in common with my own. My people have developed and perfected industries peculiar to themselves, as have the Japanese, and they also are proud of their handsome women, as are the Circassians — except that the girls of Toroczko are not for sale, nor, for that matter, are they to be had by foreigners, even for love. Their charms bloom only for their own countrymen, and by them they are jealously guarded. They never work in the fields, and so their fair faces are never tanned or freckled. The young maidens keep their rooms, and spin, weave, and embroider for their own adornment. When Sunday comes and they all go to church, they fill six benches and form a veritable 'book of beauties,' of various types, both blond and brunette, which, however, one cannot so easily distinguish, owing to the richly worked kerchiefs under which their hair is hidden. Their entire costume is snow-white, even to the fine sheepskin bodice worn by each."

"Ah, your young women think of nothing but dress, I fear," remarked Blanka.

"By no means," protested Manasseh; "on the contrary, their childhood and youth are largely devoted to education. The people of our little valley maintain a high school for boys and a seminary for girls, as well as a charity school for the poor."

"Then your people must be rich."

"No, not rich. There are no lords or ladies among them, and they have suffered more from the ravages of war than any other commmunity in Hungary."

"But how," asked Blanka, "can they afford to dress their young women in silks and laces, and give both boys and girls an education? They must have some fairy talisman for conjuring wealth out of the rocks on which their houses stand."

"And so they have. Their talisman is industry, and out of their rocky soil they conjure riches in the shape of iron, — the best that can be found in all Transylvania. The same men that fill the church every Sunday, in holiday attire, dig and delve under ground the remaining six days of the week. Another secret of their modest wealth is their abstinence from strong drink. There is not a single grog-shop in Toroczko. But I fear I am wearying you."

Blanka begged him to continue, and took occasion to ask him why he did not go back to the beautiful valley which he seemed to love so warmly.

"Because," was the answer, "my people are now enjoying a period of happiness in which I have no part. If misfortune should ever overtake them, I should go back and strive to lighten it, or at least I would bear it with them."

CHAPTER V.

HOLY WEEK IN ROME.

It was evening when the travellers reached Rome. They had accomplished the journey in the time promised by Manasseh, and now the query was raised, could their enemy, by any possibility, have outstripped them?

Upon the coachman's inquiring to what hotel he should take his passengers, Grabriel Zimandy drew out his memorandum-book and read the name of a house recommended to him by his landlord at Vienna. European innkeepers, be it observed, join together in a sort of fraternity for mutual aid in a business way, passing their guests along from city to city and from hand to hand, sometimes even providing them with letters of introduction.

The cards of the hotel in question bore the important announcement, "German is spoken here;" and this was an advantage not to be despised.

"You will come with us, won't you?" said the advocate, turning with a courteous bow to Manasseh.

"Where German is spoken? No, I thank you. If I announce myself as a Hungarian, they will kiss my hand and then charge the kiss on the bill; if I say I am a German, I shall get a drubbing and be charged for that, too. I prefer to hunt up a modest little inn where, when I register from Transylvania, the good people will think it is somewhere in America, perhaps in the neighbourhood of Pennsylvania. The Yankees, you know, are highly respected in Italy."

"I regret exceedingly —" began the advocate. "Among so many strangers it would have been very pleasant to have —"

"At least one enemy within call," interrupted the young man, with a smile. "Well, you see, I am likely to be in Rome some time; so I shall look up a quiet room for myself near the Colosseum, where the sun shines and I can carry out certain plans of my own."

The carriage turned into a brilliantly lighted street and passed a stately palace before which a richly sculptured fountain was sending its streams of sparkling water into the air.

"The Palazzo Cagliari," remarked Manasseh, but without any significant emphasis.

A natural impulse of curiosity moved Blanka to turn and look at the ancestral mansion of her husband's family. A moment later Manasseh signalled the driver to stop, and alighted from the carriage after shaking hands with his fellow travellers. Gabriel Zimandy said they should be sure to meet again soon; Madam Dormandy hoped they might all go sightseeing together in a few days; but Blanka said nothing as she bowed her farewell.

Reaching their hotel, our three travellers were greeted by the landlord with unmistakable tokens of surprise.

"And have your excellencies met with no mishap on the way?" he took early occasion to inquire.

"Certainly not. Why?"

"Your coming was announced in advance by our Vienna agent, and accordingly we reserved rooms for you. But at the same time another guest was also announced, a gentleman of high station from Hungary; and this afternoon word came that this gentleman and all his party had been captured by bandits in the ravine at the foot of Monte Rosso, and carried off into the mountains, where they will have to stay until their ransom is forthcoming. We feared your excellencies were of the party."

"No," said Gabriel; "we came by way of Orvieto."

"Lucky for you!" exclaimed the landlord.

"What is the name of the gentleman you refer to?" asked the princess, in a tone that betrayed the keenness of her interest.

"It's a queer name," answered the landlord, "and I can't remember it. But I'll find it for you in my letters of advice and send it up to your room."

Blanka had hardly laid aside her wraps when a waiter knocked at her door and presented a card on a silver salver. "Conte Benjamino de Vajdar" was the name she read in the landlord's handwriting.

On the following morning, Blanka sent for the hotel-keeper and desired him to procure for herself and her two companions admission tickets to all the sacred ceremonies of the coming week. The worthy man fairly gasped at the coolness of this request. Tickets to the Sistine Chapel, to the Tenebræ, to the Benediction, and to the Glorification — and for three persons? Why, money couldn't buy them at that late hour, he declared. Admission tickets to paradise would be more easily obtainable. At the very utmost, places might still be procured on some balcony overlooking the Piazza di San Pietro, but only at extremely high prices. Yet the view from such a position would be a fine one; and mine host, without waiting to listen to any objections, hastened away to secure tickets, if they were still to be had.

The princess made her lament to Gabriel Zimandy over her poor success in obtaining what she so ardently desired, and that gentleman sought to console her with the assurance that it was highly venture-some for ladies to trust themselves in the crowd that always attended the church ceremonies of Holy Week, and that she could read all about them much more comfortably in the newspapers. Blanka, however, took so much to heart the disappointment of her pious wishes, and came so near the point of tear-letting, that the advocate felt obliged to sally forth in person to see what he could do to console her. In less than an hour he was back again, breathless and exultant. He ran up-stairs with the agility of a much younger and less corpulent man, and hastened to the princess's room, regardless of the fact that she was at the moment under her hair-dresser's hands.

"Victory!" he cried, panting for breath. "The impossible is achieved, and here are tickets for all three of us — to everything — to the Tenebræ, the washing of feet, the Last Supper, the Resurrection, the relics, the Benediction —"

"But how did you get them?" interrupted the ladies, overcome with curiosity. Madam Dormandy had come hurrying out of her room at the first sound of his voice, and she and the princess now proceeded to pelt their victorious envoy with a volley of questions.

"Well, you see," replied the lawyer, gradually recovering his breath, "it is a curious story. As I was tearing across the Corso, intent on my errand, I felt some one catch me by the coat-tail and heard a voice call to me in Hungarian, 'Haste makes waste!' I wheeled about, and there stood our Arian friend."

"Manasseh Adorjan?"

"Yes. He asked me if we had our affairs all in order, and I told him, by no means. I complained to him of our ill luck in securing tickets to the sacred ceremonies, and that it seemed impossible to get even anywhere near the Vatican. 'Well,' said he, with that confoundedly serious expression of his that you don't know whether to take as a sign of jest or earnest, 'let me see if I can't make it possible for you.' 'But,' said I, 'you don't imagine that you, a fallen statesman and an Arian heretic, can gain what is denied to Spanish princesses of the strictest orthodoxy?' 'You shall soon see,' he answered, and proceeded to lead me through one crooked street after another, until we found ourselves in front of a palace, at whose door a military watch was posted. He handed his card to the doorkeeper, and presently we were ushered into an anteroom, where Adorjan left me while he himself went with a man who seemed to be a private secretary, or something of the sort, into the next room. It wasn't long before he came out again and put three cards into my hand. 'There they are,' said he. 'Why, you are a regular magician!' I couldn't but exclaim. 'Oh, no,' he replied, 'I am no Cagliostro; the explanation is simple enough. This is the French embassy, and Monsieur Rossi is an old friend of mine. I have visited his family often. So when I asked him for tickets to all the ceremonies of Holy Week for two Hungarian ladies and their escort, he gave them to me at once. But now you must look sharp, for cards enough have been given out to fill the Sistine Chapel six times over, and there will be a scramble to get in.' "

The princess was as pleased as a child. Her dearest wish was gratified; but, singularly enough, she owed this gratification to the very man whom she felt the necessity of avoiding and forgetting. It was, however, to the mysterious charm of the approaching ceremonies that she looked for an effective means of diverting her thoughts from forbidden channels. Yet the fact remained that he himself had opened the way for her to this earnestly desired distraction, and to Blanka it seemed as if his influence over her was only increased and strengthened by his absence.

"What return, pray, did you make for all this kindness?" she asked.

"A very ungracious one, I fear," replied Gabriel. "After receiving these tickets, which are worth many times their weight in gold, I told our benefactor that I feared they would profit us little, unless he procured one for himself, also, and acted as our guide."

"You asked him to escort us?" exclaimed the princess, consternation in her tone.

"I know it was a strange request," admitted the advocate, "to ask a heretic to witness the Passion, and the Resurrection, and the Glorification. It is like burning incense before his Satanic Majesty. Naturally enough, he refused at first point-blank, alleging that he had no right to thrust himself as attendant on two ladies without their invitation. 'Well, then,' said I, 'don't go as the ladies' escort, but just show me, your fellow countryman, the way about, else I shall certainly get lost, and find myself in the Catacombs instead of the Vatican.' Finally, I forced him to yield, and so he is to accompany us."

In the afternoon of the same day Manasseh Adorjan called on the princess, and brought her a piece of good news of the utmost importance. Her trunks, and those of her friends, had arrived safely and promptly, and were at the custom-house. She had concluded that they had fallen into the bandits' hands, but it seemed that it was not the diligence, after all, that the robbers had waylaid; it was a post-carriage engaged by one of the travellers in the hope of reaching Rome a few hours earlier than the public conveyance. This one traveller only had been carried off into the mountains by the bandits, who had despatched a letter from their captive to Rome, addressed to Prince Cagliari, and presumably relating to the ransom. But as the prince was at present in Vienna, and postal communication between the two cities was at that time slow and uncertain, the ransom stood a good chance of being considerably delayed. This was a hint to the princess to make the most of the interim, and plead her cause at the Vatican, before her enemy could put in an appearance and damage her case. Manasseh, however, betrayed no sign of possessing any knowledge of the pending divorce suit, but continued to bear himself with the courteous reserve of a new acquaintance. Two things he sought thenceforth to avoid, — paying court to the beautiful young princess, and speaking lightly of things held sacred by her.

Complying with the expressed wish of the two ladies, in the evening he made with them the round of the principal churches, which now all wore gala attire. He took his seat on the box by the coachman's side, and pointed out, in passing, the buildings and scenes of special interest. In one of the churches he showed the ladies facsimiles of the four nails used in the Crucifixion; of the originals, one, he explained, was preserved in St. Peter's, and another had been used to make the circle of the Iron Crown. He even bought as a souvenir one of these facsimiles, which a Cistercian monk was offering for sale. He obtained also consecrated palm-branches with gilded leaves, and bribed the custodian of the three sacred orange-trees planted by the Apostles to give his party each a tiny leaflet. He schooled his face to betray no incredulity when the keepers of the various holy relics recited their virtues, and related the miracles wrought by them. And when Blanka knelt in prayer before a statue of the Madonna, he withdrew respectfully to a distance. It was an earnest petition she offered before the blessed Virgin, a prayer for rescue from her enemies, and for strength to resist every temptation. And she knew not that her rescuer and her tempter were one and the same person, and that he stood there behind her at that very moment.

Of a highly impressionable temperament, and fresh from her convent life, the princess was so moved by the sacred emblems about her, and by their holy associations, that she could not conceive of any one's viewing these objects with less of awe and reverence than herself. And when her conductor recounted the legend of the sacred lance in the chapel of St. Veronica, — how the Roman lictor Longinus had pierced the Saviour's side with this lance, and been himself struck blind the same instant, but had immediately recovered his sight when he rubbed his eyes with the hand on which four drops of the Redeemer's blood had fallen, — Blanka could not but ask herself whether another such miracle might not be wrought, and another blind man be restored to sight. She dreamed of this miracle that night, and made a vow to the Virgin that in case of her deliverance from her present difficulties, she would show her gratitude by presenting the Madonna with a jewel more precious than any that adorned her crown: she would offer this young man himself, who now refused to worship at her shrine. The princess felt herself rich enough to buy this jewel for her offering. Her heart held inexhaustible treasures, of which no man as yet could claim any share. She ceased to fear him against whom she had hitherto felt obliged to be on her guard; so much strength had she gained from the sacred relics that she now thought herself strong enough to make conquests of her own.

In the morning Manasseh came early to escort the ladies and Gabriel Zimandy to the Sistine Chapel. Upon gaining the Piazza di San Pietro they found a vast throng already assembled, through which the young man was forced to pilot his charges. Blanka was compelled to cling fast to his arm, while Madam Dormandy took the advocate's, and so they made the best of their way forward. As if by instinct, Manasseh knew where a courteous request would open a path before them, where to resort to more energetic measures, and where a couple of *lire* would prove most effectual. At length he was successful in gaining the very best position in the chapel, and here, unfolding a camp-stool which he had brought with him under his overcoat, he offered Blanka a seat, whence she could view the ceremonies in comfort, and without annoyance from the pushing and crowding multitude.

Alas, poor Blanka! She only learned later from her father confessor what a sin she had committed in thus yielding to the weakness of the flesh, instead of standing through all the weary hours of that morning. A good Christian should not think of bodily comfort while his Saviour hangs bleeding on the cross. But she did not know this at the time, and therefore her escort's kind attention was most grateful to her.

The Tenebræ is one of the most impressive of all the ceremonies of Holy Week in Rome. The Sistine Chapel is draped entirely in black, and only the soft rays of thirteen wax candles serve to lessen the darkness, out of whose depths, as out of the blackness of the tomb, sounds the antiphony of mourning and lamentation. The human forms moving to and fro before the cross are hardly distinguishable, but have the appearance of vague shadows. Then the candles are, one by one, extinguished, until only a single taper is left burning on the altar — that is Jesus. And in this darkness, symbolic of grief and mourning, an invisible choir sings the *Miserere*, Allegri's world-renowned composition, whose mystic notes bring so vividly before us that last scene on Golgotha, — the agony of the dying Saviour, the taunts of the lictors, the wailing of the holy women, the shrieks of the dead whose graves are opened, and who cry aloud for mercy, and finally the rending of the Temple curtain, and the chorus of angels in heaven. All this affects even the most hardened of skeptics with a power that cannot be withstood. For the time being the imagination is mistress of the reason.

As the crowd poured out of the chapel after the ceremony was over, Blanka shot a glance of scrutiny from beneath her veil at the young man by her side. His face wore its wonted look of seriousness, the utter opposite of careless indifference, but at the same time wholly unlike the devout rapture of a believer. In fact, his expression betrayed but too clearly that his thoughts were little occupied with what he had just witnessed.

"Have you heard the *Miserere* many times before?" asked Blanka.

"Twice only, — once in the Sistine Chapel, and again in St. Stephen's at Vienna."

"But I thought its production was forbidden elsewhere than in Rome," said the princess.

"Formerly that was the case," replied Manasseh, "the publication of Allegri's work being strictly prohibited; but after Mozart had heard it once and written it down from memory, its reproduction could not be prevented. So I had a chance to hear it in Vienna, where, however, it was but ill received, some of the audience even being moved to laughter."

"For what reason, pray?"

"Oh, not from any frivolity or irreverence, but because the music, which sounds so grandly impressive here in the Sistine Chapel, strikes one as a mere confusion of discordant notes amid other surroundings."

On the following day came the washing of the Apostles' feet. Chosen priests from thirteen nations of the earth gathered in the Pauline Chapel to receive this humble service at the hands of the Pope himself. The thirteenth of these chosen ones represented the angel that is said to have appeared with the appointed twelve in St. Gregory's time. Then followed the Last Supper, at which also the holy father ministered to the Apostles in person.

The next day was Saturday, and Gabriel Zimandy declared himself surfeited with holy ceremonies. Madam Dormandy agreed with him and began to complain of a fearful headache. Then the two united in maintaining that the princess looked utterly worn out and in need of rest. But Manasseh, who, by appointment, just then came upon the scene to offer his escort for the day, laughed them all three to shame.

"That is always the way," said he; "people tire themselves out so before Saturday that on that day five-sixths of the crowd stay at home to save up their strength for Easter, and thus miss one of the most impressive spectacles of the week, — the adoration of the true cross."

Poor Gabriel was now given no rest: he was forced to accompany the others once more to the Sistine Chapel, though he declared himself already quite stiff and sore with so much standing.

The chapel was at its best; the black hangings had been removed, the light from the windows was softened, candles burned on the altar, and, as Manasseh had predicted, so many of the sightseers had stayed at home that ample room was left for those who were present. The general multitude could find little pleasure in the ceremony of the day, — the worship of a piece of wood about three yards in length, and unadorned with gold or silver. The Pope and the cardinals, gowned with no pretence to magnificence or pomp, knelt before the relic as it lay on the altar. It was but a fragment of the original cross, broken in the strife that attended its rescue. This piece is said to have been saved and carried off by an emperor, making his way barefoot from Jerusalem to Alexandria, where another emperor concealed the precious relic in a statue, and finally the Templars bore it in triumph through pagan hordes from Constantinople to Rome. And now, when the head of the Church, the pastor of a flock of two hundred million human beings, the keeper of the keys of heaven, approaches this bit of wood, he strips himself of his splendid robes, removes the crown from his head, the shoes from his feet, and goes, simply clad and barefoot, with humble mien, to kneel and kiss the sacred emblem. The cardinals follow his example, and meanwhile the choir sings Palestrina's famous composition, the "Mass of Pope Marcellinus," a wonderful piece that must have been first sung to the composer by the angels themselves.

When the last notes of the music had died away, the bells of St. Peter's began to ring, the hangings before the windows were drawn aside, and Michael Angelo's marvellous frescoes were fully revealed to the admiring gaze of all present. The swords and halberds of the guards were once more raised erect, and the choir, the prelates, and the pilgrims joined in a common "Hallelujah!"

"Hallelujah!" cried Gabriel Zimandy also, rejoicing that the ceremony was finally ended. "Never before in all my life have I been so completely tired out."

On his return to the hotel, he stoutly protested against attending any more Church functions, and argued at length the inadvisability of the ladies exposing themselves to the heat and fatigue of the Easter service. Finally, and most important of all, he added that he had been granted an audience with the Pope and must prepare his address, which was to be in Latin.

"We are infinitely indebted to you, friend Manasseh," he concluded, "for all your kindness; but you see for yourself how the case stands with me."

"Yes, yes, I understand," replied the young man. "The audience is fixed for day after to-morrow, and of course you wish to prepare for it. Let me suggest, too, that you pay the French ambassador, to whose house I took you the other day, the courtesy of a call; he knows a little Latin, although, to be sure, it can't equal your own."

This suggestion, casual though it was meant to appear, made it evident to the advocate that he owed the early granting of his request to the powerful influence of the French minister. And Manasseh, on his part, was not slow to perceive that the advocate's chief concern was lest his fair client, at this critical time, should be seen in public in the company of a strange young man. It might hurt her case irremediably.

With a full understanding of the situation, Manasseh took leave of the princess, who indeed was looking very downhearted at the prospect of missing what she had so ardently desired. But she was schooled to the denial of her own pleasure, and so quietly shook hands with her caller — then went to the window to watch his retreating form.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CONSECRATED PALM-LEAF.

EARLY the next morning the cannon began to boom from the Castle of St. Angelo. Gabriel Zimandy sprang out of bed and dressed himself quickly. His first care was to tap at Madam Dormandy's door and inquire for her health. The patient answered in a pitiful voice that the guns were fairly splitting her poor head, and that she did not expect to live the day through. This reply seemed to be quite to the advocate's liking: of the lady's succumbing to her ailment he had not the slightest fear, while he now felt assured that it would be impossible for his client to go out that day. What conception had he, heartless man, of the longing that filled the young woman's soul for the papal blessing, to which she ascribed such miraculous power, but which to him was nothing more than a Latin phrase?

Soon the bells began to ring from all the church-towers of the city, and a stream of people in gala attire poured toward St. Peter's. Poor Blanka sat at her window with eyes fixed on a certain corner, around which she had the day before seen Manasseh Adorjan's form disappear. The clocks struck twelve, thirteen, fourteen — by Italian reckoning of time; the crowds began to thin, and at last every one seemed to have betaken himself to St. Peter's. An open carriage halted in the now deserted street in front of the hotel, and Blanka recognised in its occupant the very person whose image had been so persistently before her mind's eye.

"Pardon me, princess, for intruding," began Manasseh in greeting, as he entered the young lady's presence; "but yesterday I saw that you were disappointed at not being able to attend the Easter service at St. Peter's. I have found means to remove that disappointment, I hope."

The princess felt her pulse quicken with eager delight, while at the same time she shrank back in nameless apprehension of what the young man might be going to propose.

"I fear it is too late," she replied, quietly. "I am not even dressed for the occasion."

"You have time enough," returned the other, reassuringly. "The French minister's wife has kindly offered to take you with her. Seats for the ladies of the embassy have been reserved and can be easily reached by a special entrance. They are very near the *loggia* where the papal blessing will be pronounced. In an hour Madame Rossi will be here; that will give you time to get ready."

"And are you going with us?"

"No, that will be impossible, as the reserved seats are for ladies only; but I will escort Madame Rossi and her daughter to your door, and you will, I am sure, find them very pleasant company. For myself, I shall hunt up some sort of a perch where I can get a view of the day's festivities."

So saying, the young man hurried away.

Against this plan Gabriel Zimandy could raise no objections. Indeed, he saw the policy of making friends with the French embassy, and as long as Manasseh was not to accompany the party his professional schemes were in no wise endangered.

When Manasseh returned with the French ladies he sought the lawyer. "Come, my friend," he urged, "if your legs have nothing to say against it, if your religious belief permits, and if you have studied your Latin speech enough for one day, I will find you a good shady spot where you can witness what no mortal eye has seen in all these eighteen Christian centuries, and is little likely to see again in eighteen centuries to come."

"What may that be?"

"A Pope of the Romish Church, pronouncing his blessing from the *loggia* of St. Peter's on the Roman army, preparatory to its marching forth to fight for freedom. Durando's troops are now marshalled in St. Peter's Square, awaiting the papal blessing on the swords drawn for liberty and country. It has, I know, been your dream to witness a sight like that, and now I come to invite you to its realisation."

"Well, well, that is something worth while," admitted the advocate. "The whole Roman army, and Durando himself! Surely, I can't afford to miss it." The invitation had driven quite out of his head all the objections so strenuously urged the day before.

The ladies had no difficulty in reaching the places reserved for them ; for the gentlemen, however, it was not so easy to find even standing-room. But at length Manasseh guided his companion to one end of the scaffolding which supported the ladies' platform, and there found for him a V-shaped seat in the angle of two beams, while he himself stood on a projecting timber which afforded him room for one foot, and clung to the woodwork of the platform with both hands. The discomfort of his position was lightened for him by the fact that, only a few feet above, he could see Blanka's face as she sat with eyes directed toward the *loggia* where the Pope was soon to appear.

It was a grand spectacle. The whole army — infantry, cavalry, artillery — was drawn up in the immense *piazza*, each regiment carrying two flags — the banner of the Church, on which were depicted the keys of heaven, and the red, white, and green flag of Italian freedom. The background to this scene was furnished by the cathedral itself, a vast throng of spectators crowded the foreground, and the whole united to produce an effect of pomp and grandeur that fairly beggars description.

The clocks struck eighteen — midday. The great bell sounded in the western turret of the cathedral, and the booming of cannon was once more heard from the Castle of St. Angelo. The service within the cathedral was at an end, the leather curtains that hung before the great bronze doors parted, and out poured the procession of pilgrims, until the whole wide expanse of the portico was filled. Mysterious music fell on the ear from somewhere above: a military band stationed aloft in the cupola had struck up a psalm of praise, and it seemed to the listeners to come from heaven itself. Silver trumpets — so the faithful believe — are used in rendering this piece.

All faces were now turned toward the *loggia*, a sort of projecting balcony high up on the front of the cathedral. A sound like the murmur of the sea rose from the multitude: each spectator was shifting his position, and seeking a clearer view. Then the *loggia* became suddenly filled with moving forms, — cardinals in their splendid robes, knights in mediæval armour, pages in costly livery. The crown-bearers advanced with two triple tiaras, one the gift of Napoleon I., the other presented by the queen of Spain, and both sparkling with diamonds. A third crown, — the oldest of all, originally simple in form, then a double diadem, and finally a threefold tiara, — encircled the head of the Pope himself, who, seated on a golden throne, was borne forward to the stone breastwork, on which two crowns had been placed by their bearers. The pontiff rose from his seat and the sun shone full upon his venerable form. He wore a white robe embroidered with gold, and his appearance was radiant with light. The benignant smile that illumined his countenance outshone all the diamonds in his triple crown.

How happy was Princess Blanka at that moment! and hers were the fairest gems in all that costly array, — two tears that glistened in her large dark eyes as she gazed intently on the scene before her.

The two youngest cardinals took their stand on either side of the Pope, each holding a palm-leaf in his hand. Then, over the awed and silent throng before him, in a voice still strong, sonorous, and vibrant with feeling, the aged pontiff pronounced his blessing in words at once simple, sincere, and gracious.

Blanka and Manasseh exchanged glances, and the young man felt a tear-drop fall upon his cheek. From that moment an indissoluble bond united the two.

When the benediction was over, a stentorian voice from the multitude cried, "*Evviva Pio Nono!*" The shout was caught up by all the vast throng, and sent heavenward in a united cry of ever-swelling volume. Not merely Pius IX., but St. Peter himself seemed to stand before the jubilant multitude, opening heaven's gates with one key, and the portals of an earthly paradise of freedom with another. The two cardinals cast their palm-leaves down to the people, and as they fell, fluttering uncertainly, now this way, now that, all eyes followed them to see who should be the happy ones to secure the precious emblems of benediction and absolution. One leaf, after hovering in the air a moment, sank in ever narrowing circles until it lodged on the flag of a volunteer regiment, whereupon a mighty cheer burst from thousands of throats. The other, borne hither and thither by shifting breezes, was finally wafted toward the raised platform where sat the ladies of the French embassy. A hundred hands reached eagerly for it as it sank lower and lower; but one arm, extending higher than the others, secured the prize. It was Manasseh who from his elevated position, intercepted the coveted token as it fell, and he immediately turned and presented it to Princess Cagliari, amid a storm of applause from the onlookers.

The princess was a beautiful woman, but at the moment of receiving this symbol of forgiveness and blessing, her face gained such a look of radiant happiness as can only be imagined on the countenance of an angel in his flight to heaven; and to her that precious leaf meant heaven indeed. But when she turned to thank the giver he had disappeared.

"That was really grand," admitted Gabriel Zimandy, as his friend piloted him through the surging throng to the nearest cab. "To think of the Pope's giving his blessing to an army mustered in the cause of liberty! Such a sight was never seen before."

"No," returned Manasseh; "and you must make haste to push your client's cause while he is in his present good humour, which may not last."

"But, surely, you don't mean that his Holiness is in any way trifling with the people, do you?" asked the advocate.

"I am fully convinced," replied the other, "that Pio Nono is a gentle, good-hearted, upright man, and a gracious pontiff; but I also believe that, at the very first engagement, the Austrians will give the pious Durando a most unmerciful whipping. What direction the wind will take in Rome after that, no mortal can tell. You will do well, however, to make the most of your time while that palm-leaf is still green."

CHAPTER VII.

AN AUDIENCE WITH THE POPE.

On the following day came the audience with his Holiness, Pius the Ninth.

The Very Reverend Dean Szerenyi was first sent by the master of ceremonies to instruct the lawyer and his client in the details of their approaching interview. This envoy even took pains to indicate in what sort of toilet ladies were expected to appear. The gown must come up high about the neck and might be of any colour desired, or of black silk if the wearer was in mourning. Jewelry was not forbidden. A lackey in red livery would usher the strangers into the audience-chamber. Their petition must be carried in the hand. In the throne-room — where ladies were permitted to gaze to their hearts' content on the splendid display of Japanese porcelain — the majordomo would marshal the company in a double file, and there they would wait until his Holiness appeared.

"But look here," interposed Zimandy, with a troubled look, "does the Pope know I am a Calvinist ?"

"He never asks about the religious belief of those who seek an audience with him. On all alike he bestows his blessing, assuming that all who court his favour have an equal need of his benediction."

"Are there very many asking an audience at this time?"

"Only eight hundred."

"E-e-e! Eight hundred! How am I ever going to get a chance to deliver my Latin speech that I have been working on all night?"

"You will not be called upon for it at all. It is not customary in a general audience with the Pope to make set speeches. His Holiness addresses whom he chooses, and they answer him. All petitions are taken in charge by the secretary."

"Then it is lucky I put into mine everything that I intended to say. Well, give my respects to his Holiness, and tell him I was the one who made the motion in the Pest Radical Club to have his portrait hung on the wall in a gilt frame; and if he is a smoker, I should be happy to send him some superfine —"

But the dean had urgent matters to attend to, and begged to take his leave without further delay.

Our travellers, with the eager promptness characteristic of Hungarians on such occasions, were the first to be ushered into the antechamber at the Vatican. Consequently they had an opportunity to hear the names of all the other petitioners announced by the footman as they came in by ones and twos and in little parties. They seemed to be all foreign prelates, princes, ambassadors, and other high dignitaries; and, in drawing them up in line, the majordomo gave them all precedence over our party, much to the latter's humiliation and disgust. It is not pleasant to stand waiting for a whole hour, only to find at its end that one is no farther forward than at first.

But when the antechamber was nearly full, a uniformed official entered by a side door and made his way to the very foot of the line where the Hungarians were standing.

"Serenissima principessa de Cagliari! Nobilis domina vidua de Dormand! Egregius dominus de Zimand!"

This ceremonious apostrophe was followed by a wave of the hand, which indicated that the persons addressed were to follow the speaker, and that they were granted the special favour of a private hearing before his Holiness. Through the long hall, past lines of waiting men and women, they made their way; and as they went, inquiring looks and suppressed whispers followed them. The princess was recognised by many as the fortunate recipient of the consecrated palm-leaf on the day before, and they whispered one to another, "Ah, *la beata!*"

This sudden turn of affairs drove Gabriel Zimandy's

Latin speech completely out of his head, so that he could not have given even the first word. As he hastened forward in all his court toggery, as he called it, he could have sworn that there were at least fifty swords dangling between his legs and doing their best to trip him up. After passing through a seemingly endless succession of splendid halls and stately corridors, the party was ushered into an apartment opening on the magnificent gardens of the Vatican. Here it was that Pio Nono was wont to receive the ladies whom he favoured with a private audience.

The princess and her companions stood before the august head of the Church, the sovereign who acknowledges no earthly boundaries to his dominions. Blanka felt a deep joy in her heart as she looked on that benignant countenance, her eyes filled with tears, and she sank on her knees. The Pope bent and graciously raised her to her feet. He laid his hand on her head, and spoke to her words of comfort which she enshrined in the inmost sanctuary of her heart.

When the audience was over and our friends had retired, Gabriel Zimandy could not have given any coherent account of what had passed, nor, indeed, was he in the least certain whether he had unburdened himself of his Latin speech, or stuck fast at the *beatissime pater.* Madam Dormandy, however, was sure to enlighten him as soon as they regained their hotel. He knew at least that the written petition which he had carried in his hand was no longer on his person; hence he must have accomplished his main object.

Madam Dormandy alone seemed to have kept her wits about her through it all. She was able to tell how the Pope, while Zimandy was stammering some sort of gibberish, — Hebrew or Greek, for aught she knew, — had taken his snuff-box from a pocket behind, and smilingly helped himself to a pinch of snuff. Further, the snuff-box had looked like a common tortoise-shell affair with an enamelled cover; and after he had taken his pinch, he had put his hand into the pocket of his gold-embroidered silk gown and drawn out a coarse cotton handkerchief such as the Franciscans use.

But these little details had entirely escaped the princess and her lawyer.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR.

One day, when Blanka announced her intention of visiting the Colosseum for the purpose of sketching it, Gabriel Zimandy declared that he could not be one of the party, and the two ladies must get along without his escort. He said he was going to the Lateran, in his client's interest, and added that he had just received unwelcome news from Manasseh.

"Then you have told him what brought us to Rome," said the princess.

"Are you angry with me for doing so?" asked the advocate.

"No, no; you were quite right. What word does he send you?"

"I'll read you what he says — if I can; he writes an abominable hand. 'While you are seeing the sights of Rome with the ladies,' he begins, 'important events are taking place elsewhere. General Durando has had a taste of the Austrians at Ferrara, and found them hard nuts to crack. In his wrath he now proclaims a crusade against them, fastens red crosses on his soldiers' breasts, and is pushing forward to cross the Po. But this action of his is very displeasing to the Pope, who does not look kindly on a crusade by a Roman army against a Christian nation. Accordingly he has forbidden Durando to cross the Po. If now the general disobeys, all those whose powerful favour your client at present enjoys will lose their influence; and should he suffer defeat beyond the Po, as he well may, your client's enemies could hardly fail to gain the upper hand. You will do wisely, therefore, to press an issue before it is too late.' "

"But is it possible that I should be made to suffer for a defeat on the battle-field?" asked Blanka.

"H'm! *Quidquid delirant reges, plectuntur Achivi*," returned the advocate, sententiously; and he hurried away without explaining that the quotation meant, — Whenever kings fall to quarrelling, the common people suffer for it. Such was the old Greek usage.

Blanka was thus left to find her way to the Colosseum with Madam Dormandy, under the guidance of an abbot, whom they had secured as cicerone; and, while the reverend father entertained the young widow with a historical lecture, the princess seated herself at the foot of the cross that stands in the middle of the arena, and sought to sketch the view before her. But her success was poor; she was conscious of failure with every fresh attempt. Three times she began, and as often was forced to discard her work and start over again. The Colosseum will not suffer its likeness to be taken by every one; it is a favour that must be fought for.

High up on the dizzy height of the third gallery sat a wee speck of a man with an easel before him. Even through an opera-glass the painter looked like an ant on a house-top. He wore a broad-brimmed straw hat, and behind him a large umbrella was opened against the fierce rays of the Italian sun. Thus protected, he sat there busily at work. Blanka envied him: he had mastered the mighty Colosseum and caught its likeness. How had he set about it? Why, naturally enough, he had climbed the giddy height and conquered the giant from above. She resolved to come again, early the next morning, and follow his example. With that she tore the spoiled leaves impatiently from her sketch-book, and threw them down among the thistles that sprang up everywhere between the stones of the ruin. It was getting late, and she was forced to return to her hotel and dress for the theatre.

The way back led past the Cagliari palace, and Blanka noted with surprise that its iron shutters were open and the first story brilliantly lighted. The gate, too, was thrown back, giving a view of the courtyard, which wore rather the aspect of a garden. Who could have wrought this sudden transformation in the deserted old mansion?

A still greater surprise awaited the princess when she reached her hotel. The proprietor himself came down the steps to open her carriage door, assist her to alight, and escort her to her rooms.

"Thank you, sir, but pray don't trouble yourself," began Blanka. "I can find my way very well alone."

The innkeeper persisted, however, although the double doors to which he led her, and which he threw open before her, were not those of her own apartment. The ladies found themselves in a sumptuously furnished anteroom, from which, through a half-opened door, they looked into a spacious drawing-room yet more luxuriously fitted up, with oil paintings on its walls and potted plants in its four corners. Leading out of this apartment, to right and left, were still other elaborately furnished rooms, which a footman in gold-braided red livery obsequiously threw open.

"While the princess was out," explained the hotel keeper, with a bow and a smile, "I had this suite of rooms put in order for her reception, and hope they will give entire satisfaction."

"No, no, my dear sir," protested Blanka, "they appear far too magnificent for my needs, and I prefer to remain where I was. And how about this footman?"

"A servant of the house, but now dressed in the princess's livery," was the reply. "Henceforth he is to be at your sole disposal, and a liveried coachman in a white wig, with a closed carriage, is also ordered to serve you. All this is in compliance with directions from high quarters. A gentleman was here in your absence and expressed great displeasure that Princess Cagliari and her party were lodged in a suite of only four rooms. Where is his card, Beppo? Go and fetch it."

Blanka had no need to look at the card: she knew well enough whose name it bore. Controlling her agitation, she turned calmly to the hotel proprietor. "I must beg you," said she, "not to receive orders from any one but my attorney. Otherwise I shall feel obliged to leave your hotel at once. Let my old rooms be opened for me again, and engage no special servants on my account." So saying, she returned to her former quarters.

With no little impatience she awaited the advocate's return, and as soon as he appeared questioned him eagerly for news.

"None at all," he answered, wearily. "I've been running around all day, and have accomplished absolutely nothing; couldn't find the people I wished to see, and those I did find pretended not to understand a word I said. If I only knew where that fellow Manasseh had hidden himself!"

"I could tell you," thought Blanka, but did not offer to do so. "Well," said she, aloud, "if you have no news, I have. Look at this card."

The lawyer put on his eyeglasses and read the name, — "Benjamin Vajdar."

"Prince Cagliari is in Rome also," added Blanka.

The advocate looked at her. "So Vajdar has been here, has he? Did you see him?"

"No; but he is sure to come again. I have given orders that he is to be referred to you. I have nothing to say to him."

"Just let me get hold of him!" cried Gabriel, with menace in his looks, and then added: "I only wish I knew where to find Manasseh."

"I know," said the princess to herself. She had learned his address by a curious accident. When she and the young painter went to see the Sistine Chapel together they were called upon, as are all visitors, to give their names and addresses. Thus she could not avoid hearing the street and number of Manasseh's temporary abode, and this street and number she had afterward written down in her sketch-book — foreign names are so hard to remember.

When her lawyer had withdrawn she sought her book and turned its leaves in search of the address. But though she hunted through all the pages again and again, she could not find the memorandum which she felt sure she had made. Suddenly she remembered having torn out and thrown away two or three leaves, — those containing her futile attempts to sketch the Colosseum.

At this point a letter was delivered to the princess. It was from Prince Cagliari, and asked Blanka to assign an hour at which to receive him. She answered the note at once, naming ten o'clock of the following morning.

Promptly on the hour appointed the prince's equipage appeared at the hotel door, and he himself came up the stairs, leaning on his gold-headed cane. He enjoyed the full use of only one foot, although his gouty condition was not very apparent except when he climbed a flight of stairs. Ordinarily he showed admirable skill in disguising his defect. He was still a fine-looking man, and only the whiteness of his hair betrayed his age. Clean-shaven and of florid complexion, he wore a constant smile on his finely chiselled lips, and bore himself with a graceful air of self-assertion that seldom failed of its effect on the women whom he chose to honour with his attentions.

The head waiter hurried on before him to announce his coming. Blanka met the prince in her antechamber. He took her offered hand and at the same time barred the waiter's exit with his cane.

"Is the princess still lodged in these rooms?" he demanded.

The servant could not find a word to say in apology, but the princess came to his aid.

"I wished to remain here," said she, calmly.

The domestic was then dismissed and the visitor ushered into the next room.

"I greatly regret," he began, "that you chose to put aside my friendly intercession on your behalf. These quarters do not befit your rank. Furthermore, by retaining a Protestant lawyer you appear to challenge me to the bitterest of conflicts."

"Do you so interpret my action?" asked Blanka, proud reproach in her tone.

"No, Blanka, assuredly not. Your own noble heart moved you rather to use mild measures — in spite of your attorney. You generously refrained from pushing your advantage against me while I was detained elsewhere and while my secretary was also unavoidably delayed. In return for this generosity, Prince Cagliari comes to you now, not as your opponent in a suit at law, not as a husband to claim his wife, but as a father seeking his daughter. What say you? Will you accept me as a father?"

Blanka was almost inclined to believe in the speaker's sincerity; yet he had caused her far too much pain in the past to admit of any sudden reconciliation in this theatrical fashion. She remained unmoved.

"Bear in mind, my dear Blanka," proceeded the prince, "that the key to the situation is now in my hands. Recent important events have made me a *persona grata* at the Vatican, and now the first of the conditions which I feel justified in imposing on you is that you acquiesce in the arrangements which, with all a father's forethought, I have made for your comfort during your sojourn in Rome. If the case between us is to reach a peaceful settlement, we must, above all things, avoid the appearance of mutual hostility; and it is a hostile demonstration on the part of Princess Cagliari to be seen driving about the city in a hired cab, and occupying, with her party, a suite of only four rooms. My duty demanded that I should at least offer you the use of the Cagliari palace, which consists of two entirely distinct wings, with separate entrances, stairs, and gardens; but I knew only too well that you would have rejected the offer."

"Most certainly."

"Therefore nothing was left me but to order the apartments in this hotel commonly occupied by visiting foreign princes to be placed at your disposal. No burdensome obligation, however, will be incurred by you in acceding to this arrangement, as I shall, in the event of our separation, see that the expense is deducted from the allowance which I shall be required to make you."

Blanka, who was naturally of a confiding disposition, not infrequently reposed her confidence where it was undeserved, — a failing not to be wondered at in one so young. Her husband was one of those in whom she thus sometimes placed too large a measure of trust, although she had early learned that no word from his mouth was to be accepted in its obvious meaning. Yet this matter of her apartments in the hotel seemed to her of such trifling moment that she let him have his way and consented to make the change which he desired, albeit at the same time strongly suspecting a hidden motive on his part.

"I am very glad, my dear Blanka," said Cagliari, when the princess had indicated her willingness to comply with his request, "to find you disposed to meet me half-way in this matter. We will, then, leave further details to the hotel keeper. He will provide you with servants in the livery of our house. How many do you wish — two?"

"One will suffice."

"And if he does not suit you, dismiss him and demand another. You shall have no ground for suspecting me of placing a spy upon you in the guise of a servant."

"Even if you should, it would trouble me little. A spy would find nothing to report to you."

"My dear Blanka, no one sees his own face except in a mirror; others can see it at all times."

"Have you anything to criticise in my conduct?"

"Nothing, I assure you. I know your firmness of principle. I look at you now, not through the yellow glass used by a jealous husband in scrutinising his wife, but through the rose-coloured glass that a fond father holds before his eyes in regarding a beloved daughter. If you travelled in a stranger's company on your journey to Rome, that may very well have been a mere matter of chance. If you left the accustomed route under his escort, you may have done so to avoid suspected dangers. If you are seen again in Rome at this stranger's side, I see nothing in that but his recognition of his duty toward you, — the courtesy of a fellow countryman acquainted with Rome toward a lady visiting that city for the first time. And if you walked together arm in arm, it was undoubtedly because of the pressure of the crowd, which always justifies a lady in seeking the protection of the first man available."

This speech filled Blanka with indignation and dismay. Weapons were being forged against her, she perceived; but she could do nothing. Had she offered a denial, her glowing cheeks would have testified against her. She held her peace, accordingly, and preserved such outward composure as she was able.

"*N'en parlons plus!*" concluded the prince, fully aware of his triumph. "No one shall boast of outdoing Prince Cagliari in magnanimity, — not even his wife. Where you have knelt and sued for mercy, I too will kneel; what you have written in your petition I will subscribe to, and add still further: 'We are not husband and wife, we are father and daughter.' And you shall learn that this is no empty phrase. I do not seek to sever the bond between us; I exchange it for another."

All this was uttered in so friendly a tone, and with such seeming warmth of feeling, that no one unacquainted with the speaker, and not knowing him for the most consummate of hypocrites and the cleverest of actors, could have listened to him without being moved almost to tears. But his hearer in this instance knew him only too well. She knew that Jerome Cagliari was most to be feared when he professed the noblest sentiments.

Rising from his chair, he added, as if it were a matter of the most trifling importance:

"This afternoon I will send my secretary to you."

"Your secretary?" repeated Blanka, with a start. "Pray send me anybody but him, — a notary, a strange lawyer, an attorney's clerk, a servant. I will receive your instructions from any of these, but not from your secretary."

"And why not from him?"

"Because I hate him."

"Then you hate the man who is your best friend in all the world, — yes, even a better friend than I myself. If I were to ask heaven for a son I could pray for no more excellent young man than he. He has my full confidence and esteem."

"But if you knew why I hate him!" interjected Blanka, in a voice that trembled.

"Before you bring your accusation against him," rejoined the other, "remember you are speaking, not to your husband, but to your father, who wishes not only to set you free, but also to make you happy. Accordingly, I will send Mr. Benjamin Vajdar to call on you to-morrow afternoon, to open the way for a harmonious settlement of the affair between us. I beg you to receive him as my confidant and plenipotentiary, and not to let your attorney know of his coming. For myself, I shall, with your permission, allow myself the pleasure of calling on you again."

With this the prince kissed Blanka's hand, and withdrew.

Scarcely had he gone, when Gabriel Zimandy presented himself to learn the object of Cagliari's visit. But Blanka obeyed orders, and kept back the chief motive of his coming, saying simply that he had asked permission to order a larger and finer suite of rooms for her use, and that in this matter she had thought best to humour him. The advocate acquiesced, recognising the importance of securing the prince's good-will under present conditions.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ANONYMOUS LETTER.

No sooner had her lawyer left her than a letter was delivered to Blanka by one of the hotel servants. It was unsigned, and to the following effect:

> "PRINCESS CAGLIARI: — Be cautious. Prince Cagliari is carrying out a fiendish scheme against you. Like yourself, he is bent on securing a divorce, but only that he may marry you to his protégé and favourite. He is even capable of selling his own wife. Hitherto you have been Cagliari's wife, and the Marchioness Caldariva his mistress; now he wishes to reverse these relations, and make the marchioness his wife, and you his mistress. Be on your guard. You are in the country of the Borgias."

The princess was not a little disturbed by this communication. Monstrous as was the plot which it purported to disclose, she could not disbelieve it when ascribed to the two men in question. Certain fearful remembrances of the past confirmed her suspicions, and even inspired her in her distress with thoughts of suicide.

But what if this letter were merely a trap? Who could have written it? Who, in that city, where so few knew even of her existence, was sufficiently familiar with her private affairs to be able to write it? Whom could she now consult, with whom share her anxious forebodings? Involuntarily she took up her sketch-book, and turned its leaves once more. In vain; the address was gone — gone with the leaves she had torn out and thrown away in the Colosseum.

Having no further engagements for that morning, she proposed to her companion a second visit to the Colosseum, that she might once more essay the sketch which had baffled her the day before. Both Madam Dormandy and the advocate signified their readiness to accompany her, the more so as a party of German visitors was planning an inspection of the Colosseum's subterranean chambers and passages, and Zimandy proposed to join them.

Blanka made it her first care, on arriving at the Colosseum, to search for the lost sketch-book leaves; but though she remembered exactly where she had dropped them, neither she nor her friend could discover the least trace of them. Who could have appropriated them? The artist in the gallery had been the only stranger present at the time of her previous visit.

While the advocate and Madam Dormandy went with the German party to inspect the lower regions, Blanka remained above, on the plea that such subterranean excursions made her unwell. There were no robbers or wild beasts to molest her in the arena during the others' absence, and, besides, the entrances were all guarded.

She sat down at the foot of the cross, but not to draw, for her mind was not now on her sketch. Plucking the dandelions that grew in profusion about her, she fashioned them into a chain and hung it around her neck. The thought came to her, as she was thus engaged, that of all the Christian martyrs torn to pieces by wild beasts in that arena, not one of them, when the tigers and hyenas leaped upon their prey, felt such a terror as hers at sight of the monsters that seemed to be closing in about her to rend her limb from limb.

How happy the artist must be up there in the lofty gallery! For there he was, still at work on his picture. The artist is the only really happy man. He need fear no exile; every land is his home. No foreign tongue can confuse him; his thoughts find a medium of expression intelligible to all. Wars have no terror for him; he paints them, but takes no part in them. Storms and tempests, by land or sea, speak to him not of danger, but are merely the symbols of nature's ever-varying moods. Popular insurrections furnish his canvas with picturesque groupings of animated humanity. Though all Rome surge with uproar about him, he sits under his sun-umbrella and paints. The artist is a cold-blooded man. He paints a madonna, but his piety is none the greater for it. He draws a Venus, but his heart is still whole. He pictures God and Satan, but prostrates himself before neither. How independent, too, he must feel as he wanders through the world! He asks no help in the production of his creations. The priest need not pray for rain or sunshine on his account. He seeks no office or title from prince or potentate. He desires no favour, no privilege, nor does he even require the advantage of a recognised religious belief. With his genius he can conquer the world.

Art it is, moreover, that makes woman the equal of man. The woman artist is something more than man's other half; she is complete in herself. She does not ask the world for a living, she does not beg any man to give her his name, she kneels before no marriage-altar for the priest's blessing; she goes forth and wins for herself all that she desires.

An irresistible impulse drove Blanka to ascend to the painter's lofty perch in order to see how he was succeeding in the task which she herself knew not even how to begin.

An artist engrossed in his work heeds not what is going on around him. The painter in this instance wore a simple canvas jacket, spotted with oil and colours here and there, and a straw hat, broad of brim and ventilated with abundant holes. The princess, looking over his shoulder, was far less interested in the painter than in his work. Indeed, the artist himself was so absorbed in his task that, to save time, he held one of his brushes crosswise between his teeth while he worked with the other. Yet the instinct of politeness impelled him, as soon as he heard the rustle of a lady's skirt behind him, to remove his broad-brimmed hat and place it on the floor at his side.

"Manasseh!"

Startled surprise and gladness spoke in that word, which slipped out ere the speaker's discretion could prevent it. The young man turned quickly.

"Princess!" he exclaimed, "where did you drop from?"

"I was not looking for you," she stammered, thus betraying that she had been seeking him and was rejoiced, heart and soul, at the chance that had led her to him.

Manasseh smiled. "No, not for me, but for the painter wrestling with the Colosseum from this lofty roost. I saw you yesterday attempting the same task from below."

"And you recognised me — so far off?"

"I have very good eyes. I also saw that you were dissatisfied with your attempts, for you tore out one leaf after another from your sketch-book and threw them away."

"Did you find them again?" asked Blanka, breathlessly.

"I made it a point to do so, Princess," was the reply.

"Oh, then give them back to me, please!"

"Here they are."

No creditor ever did his distressed debtor a greater favour in surrendering to him an overdue note than did Manasseh in restoring the lost leaves to their owner. She replaced them carefully in her sketch-book, assuring herself, as she did so, that the missing address was on the blank side of one of them. What if it had caught the young man's eye? How would he have explained its presence there?

She sat down to rest a moment on the stone railing of the gallery, her back to the arena and her face toward Manasseh, — an arrangement that very much interfered with the artist's view of what he was painting. The sun shone directly in her eyes, and she had no sunshade, having left hers in the carriage. The arena was so shaded that she had needed none there. Manasseh adjusted his umbrella so as to shield the princess, and the rosy hue which its red fabric cast on her face reminded him of the *Horæ* that precede the sun-god's chariot at dawn, their forms glowing with purple and rose-coloured tints in the morning light.

"I am very glad I happened to meet you," said Blanka, speaking more sedately this time. "The party I came with is down below listening to an archæological lecture on the *cunei*, the *podium*, the *vomitorium*, and heaven knows what all, in which I am not interested. So I have time to discuss with you, if you will let me, a point which you raised the other day and which I have been puzzling over ever since. You said that where you used to live revenge is unknown; and that, though you were suffering under a grievous injury and had the means to exact full satisfaction, yet you would not take your revenge. I too am suffering in the same manner, and that is why I am now in Rome. I have pondered your words and have imitated your example. Possessing the means of revenge, I refused to use them. I loosed my enemy's hands when they were bound. Did I do well ?"

"Yes."

"No, I did not. I should have taken my revenge. Revenge is man's right."

"Revenge is the brute's right," Manasseh corrected her. "It never repairs an injury that has once been done. In this I and the handful of my fellow-believers differ from mankind in general. In our eyes war is revenge, the duel is revenge, capital punishment is revenge, revolution is revenge. Those who profess themselves followers of Jesus too often forget that when he was dying on the cross he said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'"

"That was said by Jesus the man; but Jesus the God has ascended into heaven, whence he will come to judge the quick and the dead. And that is revenge."

"That conception of the Judgment is one that I cannot entertain," returned Manasseh. "Man has made a god of the noblest of men, and has made him like those earlier divinities who slew Niobe's innocent children with their arrows."

Blanka was sitting so far back on the stone railing that the artist felt obliged to warn her of her danger.

"Oh, I am protected by guardian angels," she replied, lightly. She wished to learn whether one of those angels was then before her. "I received this morning an anonymous letter," she continued, "and as it contains certain facts which only you could know, my first thought was that you had written it."

"I assure you, I have never written you a letter," declared Manasseh.

"Please read it." She handed him the letter.

How quickly the young man's calm face flushed and glowed with passion as he read! The martyrs of old could forgive their enemies for the tortures inflicted on them; but could they also pardon the inhumanity shown to their loved ones? Manasseh crumpled the paper in his hand with vindictive energy, as if he had held in his grasp the authors of that detestable plot. Yet what right had he now to take vengeance on a man whom he had refrained from punishing on Anna's behalf? Anna was his own sister, and as such a beloved being. Her life had been spoiled by this man, yet her brother had been able to declare, "We do not seek revenge"—although this revenge was easily in his power. And what was Blanka to him? A dream. And did this dream weigh more with him than the sorrow that had invaded his own family?

He returned the letter to its owner. "Just like them!" he muttered between his teeth.

"Prince Cagliari is in Rome," remarked Blanka.

"I know it. I met him, and he spoke to me and thanked me for the attentions I had shown his wife during Holy Week."

It was fortunate for the princess that she sat in the rosy light of the red umbrella, so that her heightened colour passed unnoticed.

"He called on me this morning," said she, "and showed himself very gracious. His position is now stronger than it was, affairs at the Vatican being guided at present by those who look upon him with favour."

"Yes, I know that," said Manasseh.

"How do you know it, may I ask?"

"Oh, I have wide-reaching connections. My landlord is a cobbler. 'Messere Scalcagnato' lounges about the *piazza* by the hour, is therefore well instructed in political matters, and keeps me duly informed of all that takes place at the Vatican."

The princess gave a merry laugh at the thought of Manasseh's taking lessons in politics from the professor of shoemaking. A little feeling of satisfaction contributed also to her display of good humour: she was assured by Manasseh's words that his address was still the same that she had noted in her sketch-book. But her laugh was immediately followed by a sigh, and she folded her hands in her lap.

"I wage war with nobody, Heaven knows!" she exclaimed, sadly. "I have merely sued for mercy, and it has been promised me."

"Princess," interposed the young man, gently, "I cannot intervene between you and your enemies, but I can arm you with a weapon of defence against their assaults. If you wish to repulse the man whom you fear and who pursues you, — to give him such a rebuff that he will never again dare to approach you, — then wait until he makes the proposal which you dread, and give him this answer: 'Between you and me there is a canonical interdict which renders our union impossible; it is contained in the fourteenth paragraph of the Secret Instructions.' As soon as you say that he will vanish so completely from your presence that you will never set eyes on him again."

"Wonderful!" cried Blanka. "That will surely be a miracle."

"Such it may always remain to you," returned Manasseh, "and you may never know how deep a wound you have inflicted. But you must thenceforth look for no mercy. Sue urgently for a decision, and be prepared for a harsh one."

"Thank you," said Blanka, simply. "*N'en parlons plus*" — repeating Prince Cagliari's phrase.

With that she stepped lightly to the stone block which the artist had been using for a chair, and, seating herself on it, began to copy in outline his painting of the Colosseum, as if that had been the sole purpose of her coming. Nor did she so much as ask permission thus to violate the rules of professional courtesy. This sketching from a finished picture she found vastly easier than drawing from the object itself, a task which always proves elusive and baffling to the beginner. Manasseh took his stand behind her as she worked, but his eyes were not wholly occupied in following her pencil.

Meanwhile the archæological explorers had abundant time to inspect all the subterranean passages and chambers of the Colosseum, and it was only when they emerged into the arena and began to seek their lost companion, with loud outcries, that she started up in some alarm and made haste to retrace her steps.

Manasseh picked up the dandelion chain that had fallen from her neck and put it in his bosom.

CHAPTER X.

THE FOURTEENTH PARAGRAPH.

Blanka was now like a boy who fears to stay at home alone, and to whom his father has therefore given a loaded gun as a security. The lad has a shuddering eagerness to encounter a burglar, that he may try his weapon on him, never doubting but that he can kill a giant if need be. Let the robbers come if they wish; he is armed and ready for them.

In this confidence Blanka's entire mood underwent a change: she became light-hearted almost to the point of unrestrained gaiety. At the very door of her hotel she began to exchange pleasantries with the landlord, who came forward to greet her with the announcement that a gentleman, a count, had called upon her in her absence.

"Count who?" asked the princess, whereupon she was presented with a card bearing the name of Benjamin Vajdar. But she read it without losing a particle of her serenity, and then ordered an elaborate lunch.

While her dishes were preparing, she sent for a hair-dresser and for a maid to assist at her toilet.

She wished to make herself beautiful — even more beautiful than usual — and, indeed, she accomplished her object. Her slender form, its height accentuated by a long bodice, looked still taller from the imposing manner in which her hair was dressed. Her features, until then somewhat drawn by the strain of constant anxiety, gained now a vivacity that was matched by the added colour that glowed in her cheeks. A single morning in the Italian sun had, it would have seemed to an observer, worked wonders in her appearance. But what she herself marvelled at most of all was the new light that shone in her eyes. What could have caused this transformation? The weapon which she held in her hands, — "the fourteenth paragraph of the Secret Instructions." What cared she that to her these words were utterly meaningless? It sufficed her to know that there was such a paragraph; *he* had told her so.

A waiter announced that her lunch was served. Ordinarily Blanka ate no more than a sick child; now she was conscious of an appetite like that of a convalescent making up for a long series of lost meals. The dainties which she had ordered tasted uncommonly appetising. While she was busy with her oysters, the head waiter informed her that the "count" had come a second time and begged leave to wait upon her.

"Show him up," promptly replied the princess, without allowing her lunch to be interrupted in the least.

The handsome young man already introduced to the reader was ushered in. The situation in which he found the princess seemed scarcely to harmonise with his plans. It rendered exceedingly difficult any approach to the sentimental.

"Set a chair for the gentleman," Blanka commanded her attendant, speaking, as if from forgetfulness, in Hungarian, and then correcting herself with a great show of surprise at her own carelessness. "*Grazie!* And now, sir, pray be seated. You will pardon me if I go on with my lunch. We can converse just the same. This man will not understand a word we say. We may consider our interview entirely private."

Vajdar misinterpreted the situation: he thought the princess feared him, as of old, and that therefore she kept her servant in the room. This belief only added fuel to his evil passions. He who sees himself feared gains an increased sense of power.

"I come bearing the olive-branch, Princess," he began, in smooth accents.

At this Blanka turned suddenly to her attendant. "That reminds me," she exclaimed; "Beppo, the waiter forgot my olives."

Vajdar had taken a chair and drawn up to the table. "The prince wishes," he continued, "to keep his promise and to show you all the affectionate concern of a father toward his daughter." He produced a roll of manuscript from his pocket. "There are certain points in your marriage contract which must be discussed. Prince Cagliari made over to you, at the time of your union, one million silver florins. If you should gain your suit you would retain this sum in full; otherwise you would lose it all. He now offers you the following compromise. The principal is not to be paid into your hands, but you are to receive the interest on it, at six per cent., during your lifetime. And, more than that, one-half of the Palazzo Cagliari is placed at your disposal as a dwelling."

The princess bowed, as if in assent, but expressed the hope that she should not be obliged to stay long in Rome.

"I think you will find it advisable to remain some time, at any rate," said the young man.

"But I wish to return home, to Hungary, where, as you know, I have an estate of my own."

"That will be impossible, because the Serbs have burnt your castle to the ground."

"Burnt it to the ground? But my steward has not informed me of this."

"And for a very good reason: the insurgents chopped off his head on his own threshold."

Even this intelligence could not destroy Blanka's appetite. She ate her sardines with unusual relish, and Vajdar could see that she gave little credence to his words.

"Stormy times are ahead of us," he went on, "and I assure you this is the only safe retreat for you, — the holy city, the home of peace."

"As is proved by the iron shutters on the windows of the Cagliari palace," remarked Blanka. "But tell me, if I should wish to choose my own household and my own intimates, would that liberty be allowed me?"

"Undoubtedly. Nevertheless, it would be greatly to your advantage to surround yourself with persons speaking the language of the country and familiar with its ways."

"And if I should win my cause, and should take a fancy to marry again, could I select a husband to suit myself?"

This was too much. It was like throwing raw meat to a caged tiger.

"Without doubt," murmured Benjamin Vajdar between his teeth, at the same time casting furious glances at the servant behind his mistress's chair.

Suddenly the princess changed her tactics. She wished to show her enemy that she dared leave her entrenchments and offer battle in the open field.

"Caro Beppo," said she, turning to the servant, "clear the table, please, and then stay outside until I call you. Meantime, admit no one."

The two were left alone, and Vajdar was free to say what he wished. Blanka made bold to rise and survey herself coquettishly in the mirror, as if to make sure of her own beauty. She was the first to speak.

"All these favourable turns in my affairs are due to your kind intervention, I infer," she began.

"Without wishing to be boastful, I must admit that they are. You know the prince: he has more whims and freaks than Caligula. He has moments when he is capable of throttling an angel from heaven, and gentle moods in which he is ready to do his most deadly enemy a secret kindness. These latter phases of his humour it was my task to lie in wait for and turn to your account. Whether this was a difficult task or not, you who know the prince can judge."

"You will find me not ungrateful," said the princess. "In case the unpleasant affair which has called me to Rome is settled satisfactorily, I shall make over to you, as the one chiefly instrumental in effecting this settlement, the yearly allowance intended for me by the prince. For myself I retain nothing further, and wish nothing further, than my golden freedom."

Vajdar's face glowed with feeling. He was a good actor and could summon the colour to his cheeks at will.

"But even if you should give me your all, and the whole world besides," he returned, "I should count it as dross in comparison with one kind word from your lips. I know it is the height of boldness on my part to strive for the object of my longing; but an ardent passion justifies even the rashest presumption. You remember the fable of the giants' piling Pelion upon Ossa in order to scale Olympus. I am capable of following their example. You would cease to look down on me were I of like rank with yourself; and this equality of station I shall yet attain."

"I am sure I shall be the first to congratulate you."

"The prince has promised to be a father to you if, as the result of a peaceful separation, he ceases to be your husband. A somewhat similar promise he has made to me also."

"Does he intend to adopt you as his son?" asked Blanka.

"Such is his purpose," replied Vajdar.

"And what, pray, is his motive in this?"

Benjamin Vajdar averted his face, as if contending with feelings of shame. "Do not ask me," he begged, "to betray the weakness of my poor mother. Hers was an unhappy lot, and I am the child of her misfortune. He whose duty it is to make that misfortune good is — Prince Cagliari."

Blanka could hardly suppress an exclamation. "Oh, you scoundrel!" she was on the point of crying, "how can you dishonour your mother in her grave, and deny your own honest birth, merely to pass yourself off as a prince's bastard son?" Instead of this she clapped her hands and exclaimed: "How interesting! It is just like a play at the theatre. 'Is not the little toe of your left foot broken?' 'Yes.' 'Then you are my son.' Or thus: 'Haven't you a birthmark on the back of your neck?' 'I have.' 'Let me see it. Aha! you are my long-lost boy.' Or, again: 'Who gave you that half of a coin which you wear on a string around your neck?' 'My mother, on her death-bed.' 'Come to my arms. You have found your father.'"

Her listener was convinced that he had to do with a credulous child whose ears were open to the flimsiest of fairy tales. He proceeded to entertain her with further interesting details of his story, after which the princess produced the anonymous letter she had that morning received. First smoothing it out on her knee, — for it had been sadly crumpled by a certain hand, and, indeed, even bore the impression of a man's thumb in oil, — she presented it to her visitor.

"Please read that," said she, "and then explain it to me."

Vajdar had no sooner glanced at the letter than he perceived that the enemy, by a feigned retreat, had been decoying him over a mine which threatened presently to explode. Yet his assurance did not desert him.

"A stupid bit of play-acting!" he exclaimed, throwing the letter down on the table.

"But whose interest could it have been to indulge in play-acting at my expense?" asked Blanka.

"I can tell you, for I recognise the handwriting. The Marchioness Caldariva wrote you that letter."

"The Marchioness Caldariva? Is she here?"

"To be sure. The prince never travels without her."

"But what motive had she thus to injure herself and, perhaps, prevent her marriage with the prince?"

"Motive enough for a woman," replied Vajdar,—"jealousy."

"Jealousy!" repeated Blanka, in astonishment.

But one glance at the face confronting her was a sufficient explanation. That handsome face, smiling with triumph and self-confidence, made her tingle with wrath and scorn from head to foot. This man, it appeared, was impudent enough to play the rôle of suitor to his patron's wife, and also, at the same time, to pose as the object of a sentimental attachment on the part of that patron's mistress. And he smiled complacently the while.

"Sir," resumed the princess, whom that smile so irritated that she resolved to use her deadly weapon without further delay, "I appreciate your devotion to my cause, but I cannot deceive you. I must not encourage hopes that would end only in disappointment. Let this matter not be referred to again between us."

"But how if it were imposed by the prince as the indispensable condition of a peaceful settlement of your relations with him?"

"I cannot believe that such is the case," replied Blanka, calmly. "But however that may be, I cannot bind myself by any promise to you, knowing as I do that the question of matrimony between us is one that the canons of the Romish Church forbid us to consider."

"Ah, you have been studying ecclesiastical law, I see, — an error like that of the sick man that reads medical works. You undoubtedly have in mind the tenth paragraph, which forbids a son to marry his father's divorced wife; but you should have read farther, where it is declared that a marriage pronounced null and void by the clemency of the Pope is as if it never had been, and thus offers no hindrance to a subsequent union."

"No," rejoined the princess, "I did not refer to the tenth paragraph. The paragraph which renders our union impossible is the fourteenth."

The shot was fired, the mark was hit. Like a tiger mortally wounded the man sprang up and stood leaning on the back of his chair, glaring at his assailant with a fury that made her draw back in alarm. With what sort of ammunition had the gun been loaded, that it should inflict so deadly a wound, — that it should cause such a sudden and complete transformation of that complacently smiling face?

"Who told you that?" demanded Vajdar so furiously that Blanka recoiled involuntarily. "Only one person could have been your informant, and I know who that person is. I shall have my revenge on both of you for this!"

With that he was gone, hurrying out of the room and out of the hotel as if pursued by a legion of devils. Beppo came running to his mistress, and seemed surprised not to find her lying in her blood on the floor with half a dozen dagger-thrusts in her bosom.

"Well," he exclaimed, "whoever that man may be, I shouldn't like to meet him on a dark night in a narrow street."

Blanka told her servant that if the gentleman who had just left ever called again, she should not be at home to him. Then she sent her obedient Beppo away, as she wished to be alone. First of all, she must ponder the meaning of those mysterious words that had proved so potent in routing her enemy. She could hardly wait for her lawyer to return, so eager was she to question him in the matter.

"Well," began the advocate on entering, "what have you accomplished?"

"I have not made peace."

"Why not?"

"Because it would have cost more than war. All negotiations are broken off. Read this letter."

"A devilish plot!" cried the lawyer wrathfully. "But they are fully capable of carrying it out, all three of them. Did you show this to Vajdar?"

"Yes."

"And was that why he ran out of the hotel in such an extraordinary manner that the very waiters felt tempted to seize him at the door?"

"They had no such thought, I'll warrant," returned Blanka. "They are all in his pay. To-morrow I leave this place. You must find me a private dwelling."

"I have one for you already. The Rossis are moving out of the embassy, and have engaged a private house. They invite you to share their new quarters with them. There is ample room."

"Oh, how fortunate for me!"

"And yet the affair is not so altogether fortunate, after all. Rossi has fallen from favour, and with his fall the whole liberal party loses its influence at the Vatican."

But what did the princess care for the liberal party at that moment? She was thinking of the lucky chance that had made it possible for her to meet Manasseh again — at the house of their common friends.

"Now I must beg you," said she, changing the subject, "to press my suit as diligently as possible. But first let me ask you a question. You are thoroughly familiar with the marriage laws of the Romish Church, aren't you?"

"I know them as I do the Lord's Prayer."

"Do you remember the fourteenth paragraph?"

"The fourteenth paragraph? Thank God we have nothing to do with that."

"Why 'thank God'?"

"Because the fourteenth paragraph has to do with state's prison offences; it declares null and void any marriage, if either of the contracting parties has committed such an offence."

The mystery was clear to Blanka now.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DECISION.

Gabriel Zimandy came to the princess one day with a very downcast mien.

"Our case makes no headway," he lamented, "and the reason is that your advocate is a Protestant. Now there are two ways to remedy this: either you must dismiss me and engage a Roman Catholic lawyer, or I must turn Roman Catholic myself. The latter is the shorter and simpler expedient."

Blanka thought him in fun, and began to laugh. But Zimandy maintained his solemnity of manner.

"You see, Princess," he went on, "I am ready to renounce the faith of my fathers and incur the world's ridicule, all to serve you. I am going this morning to the cardinal on whom the whole issue depends, to ask him to be my sponsor at the baptism."

The princess pressed his hand warmly in sign of her appreciation of his devotion.

In a few days the lawyer carried out his purpose and was received into the Church of Rome. The newspapers gave the matter considerable prominence, and it was generally expected that the godfather's present to the new convert would be a favourable decision in the pending divorce suit. And, in fact, a week later the decision was rendered. It was to the following effect:

The husband and wife were declared divorced, but with the proviso that the latter should never marry again, and the former not during his divorced wife's lifetime. Thus the coffin-lid was closed on the young wife, who was, as it were, buried alive; but in falling it had caught and held fast the bridal veil of the Marchioness Caldariva, who could not now hope to be led to the altar so long as the princess remained alive. Had there been in this some malevolent design to wreak vengeance on the two women at one stroke, the purpose could not have been better accomplished.

The further provisions of the decree of the Roman Curia were of secondary importance. Prince Cagliari was required to pay to Princess Zboroy — for Blanka retained her rank and title — an annuity of twelve thousand ducats, to give over for her use as a dwelling one wing of the Cagliari palace, and to restore her dowry and jewels. These latter terms were evidently to be credited to Gabriel Zimandy's generalship; for his client might have found herself left with neither home nor annuity. So the lawyer's conversion had met with its reward even in this world.

But Blanka's enjoyment of house and home and yearly income was made dependent on a certain condition: she was never to leave Rome. The nature of the decree rendered this provision necessary. As she was forbidden to contract a second marriage, her judge found himself obliged to keep her under his eye, to make sure that his mandate was obeyed; and no more delicate and at the same time effective way to do this could have been devised than to offer her a palace in Rome and bid her enjoy its possession for the rest of her life. This was surely kinder than shutting her up in a convent.

After the rendering of this decree Blanka lost no time in taking possession of that half of the Cagliari palace assigned to her, and in engaging a retinue of servants befitting her changed surroundings. Her own property yielded her an income equal to that which she received from the prince, and thus she was enabled to allow herself every comfort and even luxury that she could desire. Of the two wings of the palace, Blanka's faced the Tiber, while the other fronted upon the public square. Each wing had a separate garden, divided from its neighbour by a high wall of masonry, and the only connection between the two parts of the house was a long corridor, all passage through which was closed. What had once been a door, leading from the room which Blanka now chose for her bedchamber into the corridor, was filled in with a fireplace, whose back was formed by a damascened iron plate. This apartment the princess selected for her asylum, her hermitage, where she could be utterly shut out from the world.

The next day after the decision was rendered, Blanka was greeted by her bosom friend, the fair widow Dormandy, with the announcement of her engagement to Gabriel Zimandy. They intended to be married in Rome, she said, and then return to Hungary, whither the bridegroom's business called him. It was clear to Blanka now why her lawyer had been so ready to renounce "the faith of his fathers." It was more for the sake of winning the hand of Madam Dormandy, who was a devout Catholic, and of marrying her then and there, in Rome, than on account of his client's interests. Here let us take leave of the worthy man and let him depart with God's blessing, his newly married wife by his side, and his honorarium from Princess Blanka in his pocket.

Thus the divorced wife, who was yet hardly more than a girl, found herself left alone in Rome. She shut herself off entirely from the world, never venturing into society lest people should whisper to one another as she passed, — "*la condannata!*" She received no one but her father confessor, who came to her once a week. The sins which she had to confess to him were, — the doubting of providence, rebellion against human justice, forbidden dreams in waking hours, envy of others' happiness, aversion to prayer, and hatred of life — all sins for which she had to do penance.

Meanwhile quite a different sort of life was being led in the other wing of the palace. She could not but hear, from time to time, sounds of mirth and gaiety in the adjoining garden, or even through the solid partition-wall of the house. Voices that she knew only too well, and some that she hated, penetrated to her ears and drove her from one room to another.

In due time, however, the malarial fever of the Italian summer came to her as another distraction. It was an intermittent fever, and for six weeks she was subject to its periodical attacks, which returned every third day with the constancy of a devoted lover. When at length she began to mend, her physician prescribed a change of air. Knowing that his patient could not absent herself from Rome and its vicinity, he did not send her to Switzerland, but to Tivoli and Monte Mario; and even before venturing on these brief excursions she was obliged to ask permission at the Vatican. The convalescent was allowed to spend her days on Monte Mario, but required to return to Rome at nightfall. Good morals and good laws demanded this.

Nevertheless, even this slight change — the drives to and from Monte Mario, and the mountain air during the fine autumn days — did the princess good, and eventually restored her health.

Meanwhile there was more than one momentous change in the political world, but Blanka heeded them not. What signified to her the watchword of the period, — "Liberty?" What liberty had she? Even were all the world beside free, she was not free to love.

CHAPTER XII.

A GHOSTLY VISITANT.

It was the irony of fate that the mansion which had been assigned as a permanent dwelling-place to the woman condemned to a life of asceticism, had been originally fitted up as a fairy love-palace for a beautiful creature, possessed of an unquenchable thirst for the fleeting joys of this earthly existence. Over the richly carved mantelpiece in Blanka's sleeping-room was what looked like a splendid bas-relief in marble. It was in reality no bas-relief at all, but a wonderfully skilful bit of painting, so cleverly imitating the sculptor's chisel that even a closer inspection failed to detect the deception. It represented a recumbent Sappho playing on a nine-stringed lyre. The opening in the sounding-board of the instrument appeared to be a veritable hole over which real strings were stretched.

This painting Blanka had before her eyes when she lay down to sleep at night, and it was the first to greet her when she awoke in the morning. Nor was it simply that she was forced to see it: Sappho seemed able to make her presence known by other means than by addressing the sight alone. Mysterious sounds came at times from the lyre, — sometimes simple chords, and again snatches of love-songs which the princess could have played over afterward from memory, so plainly did she seem to hear them. Occasionally, too, the notes of a human voice were heard; and though the words were muffled and indistinct, as if coming from a distance, the air was easily followed. These weird melodies came to Blanka's ears nearly every evening, but she did not venture to tell any one about them. She tried to persuade herself it was all imagination on her part, and feared to relate her experience, lest she should incur suspicion of insanity and be consigned to a less desirable prison than the Cagliari palace.

One evening, as she was preparing to retire, and was standing for a moment before her mirror, the Sappho seemed to give vent to a ripple of laughter. The princess was so startled that she dropped the candle she held in her hand. Once more she heard that mysterious laugh, and then she beat a hasty retreat to her bed and buried herself in the pillows and blankets. But, peeping out at length and throwing one more glance at the picture, which was faintly illumined by her night-lamp, she heard still another repetition of the mysterious laughter, coming apparently from a great distance. Was this, too, an illusion, a dream, a trick of her imagination? If the painted Sappho was alive, why did she give these signs only at night, and not in the daytime as well?

November came, and with it rainy days, so that Blanka was constrained to suspend her drives to Monte Mario and remain in the house. Every evening she sat before her open fire with her eyes fixed on the glowing phœnix with which the back of the fireplace was adorned. It was the work of Finiguerra, the first of his craft to discard the chisel for the hammer. The many-hued feathers of the flaming bird were of steel, copper, brass, Corinthian bronze, silver, and gold. Especially resplendent was the bird's head, with its gleaming red circle around the brightly shining eye. This eye glowed and sparkled in the flickering light of the crackling wood fire until it seemed fairly endowed with life and vision.

One evening, as the princess was watching this glowing eye, it suddenly vanished from the bird's head and left a dark hole in its place. Then, as if not content with this marvellous demonstration, the phœnix next took flight bodily and disappeared, apparently up the chimney, with a rattling, rasping sound, as of the creaking of cogged wheels, leaving a wide opening where it had been. The coals which still glowed on the hearth presently died with a hissing noise, and only the soft light of the shaded lamp diffused itself through the room. Out of the mysterious depths of the fireplace stepped the white-clad form of a woman.

"I am the Marchioness Caldariva," announced the unbidden guest.

The suddenness and the mystery of it all, as well as the name that greeted her ears, might well have startled the Princess Blanka. The strange visitor was of tall and slender form, and suggested, in her closely fitting gown of soft material, a statue of one of the pagan goddesses. Her thick blond hair was carelessly gathered into a knot behind; her complexion was pale, her blue eyes were bright and vivacious, and her coral lips were parted in a coquettish smile. Every movement was fraught with grace and charm, every pose commanded admiration. She followed up her self-introduction with a laugh — a laugh that sounded familiar to her listener. It was the Sappho's tones that she heard. Blanka gazed in wonder at the mysterious apparition. She thought she must be dreaming, and that this was but another creation of her own fancy.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the visitor, "an original way to pay a call, isn't it? — without warning, right through the back wall of your fireplace, and in *négligé*, too! But as you wouldn't visit me, I had to come to you, and this is the readiest communication between our apartments. You didn't know anything about it, did you? The back of your fireplace is a secret door. If you press on the green tile here at the left, the phœnix flies up the chimney, and then if you bear down hard on this one at the right, it returns to its place again. Do you see?"

As she spoke the white lady stepped on the tile last designated, and straightway the phœnix descended and filled the opening through which she had just made her entrance.

"On the other side," she continued, "is a piece of mechanism which will only work when a secret lock has been opened, and to effect this the bird's eye must first be pushed aside to make room for the key. Your ignorance of all this became apparent to me when I found both of the two keys in my room. One of them belongs to you, and I have brought it to give you. Without it you might be broken in upon most unpleasantly by some unwelcome intruder. But with the key in your possession, you can insert it in the lock whenever you wish to guard against any such intrusion."

With that the speaker handed over the key, and then went on:

"Now you will be able to visit me, just as I do you. One thing more, however, is necessary. You generally have a fire in your fireplace, and not every woman is a Saint Euphrosyne, able to walk barefoot over glowing coals. Here is a little bottle of liquid with which you can quench the flames at pleasure. It is a chemical mixture expressly prepared for this purpose. And in this other bottle is another liquid for rekindling the fire, — no secret of chemistry, this time, but only naphtha. Let us try it at once, for your room is cold and I have nothing on but this dressing-gown."

The flames were soon crackling merrily again in the fireplace. Blanka, much bewildered and still doubting the evidence of her senses, sank down on a sofa, while her unbidden guest seated herself opposite. The princess raised her eyes involuntarily to the Sappho over the mantelpiece. Again the familiar laugh fell on her ears.

"You look up at the Sappho," said the marchioness. "You have heard her play and sing and laugh more than once, haven't you? Well, you shall learn the secret of it all. A jealous husband once had the passage constructed which connects our two apartments. You know the story of Dionysius's Ear. Here you see it in real life. A hollow tube runs from the opening in the lyre directly to my room, and through this the jealous husband was able to hear every sound in his wife's chamber. Through it, too, you have heard me sing and play and laugh, and I have heard tones of sadness from your room, and exclamations in an unknown tongue, with no cheering word to comfort you and drive away your sorrow. Three days ago, about midnight, you began to sing, and that time I could follow the words, — '*De profundis ad te clamavi, Domine.*' Don't look so surprised. You are not dreaming all this, and I am really the Marchioness Caldariva, better known as 'the beautiful Cyrene.' I have intruded on you this evening, but to-morrow you will admit me of your own free will, and the day after you shall be my guest. We will signal to each other through the tube when we are alone and disengaged, and we shall soon be great friends."

Blanka started slightly at the bare thought of friendship with this woman.

"I am in love with you already," continued the Marchioness Caldariva. "For the past week we have been meeting every day. We kneel side by side in the same church, for I go to church regularly; but you have not noticed me, because you never raise your eyes from your prayer-book to look at your neighbours' bonnets and gowns. As for me, now, I watch you all the time I am praying. Daily prayers are a necessity with me. In the morning I pray for the sins I have committed the day before, and in the evening for those to be committed on the morrow. Another bond of sympathy between us is the similar lot to which we are both condemned, — a life unblessed by domestic happiness, — and we cherish therefore a common hatred of the world.

You, however, show yours by leading a solitary life of mourning, I mine by amusing myself the best way I can. If I were strong enough to follow your example, I should do so, but I can't live without distraction. You are strong; I am weak. I admire in you your power to humble your enemies before you. You were told, weren't you, that I wrote that anonymous letter?"

Blanka looked at the speaker with wide eyes of inquiry and wonder. She began at length to place confidence in her words.

"And you were told the truth, too," continued the other. "Oh, those two men are intriguers of the deepest dye. I was accused of upsetting their plan. I was told how mercilessly you had repulsed one of them. Really, that was a master stroke on your part. The fourteenth paragraph! He himself confessed the secret to me, — how he forged a note, some years ago, in the name of a good friend of his, who now holds the incriminating document in his possession. With it he can at any time crush his false friend and deliver him over to a long imprisonment. The trembling culprit wished to free himself at any cost from this sword of Damocles suspended over his head, and he proposed to me two ways to effect the desired end. One was for me to seduce the young artist and then, as the price of my smiles, cajole him into surrendering the fatal note."

The beautiful Cyrene threw at her listener a look full of the proud consciousness of her own dangerous charms. Blanka drew back in nameless fear under her gaze.

"The other way," proceeded the marchioness, "was to have him assassinated if he refused to give up the forged paper."

Blanka pressed her hands to her bosom to keep from crying out.

"Between these two plans I was asked to choose, and I rejected them both, — the first because I knew the young man adored you, the second because I knew you reciprocated his feeling."

The princess rose hastily and walked across the room, seeking to hide her tell-tale blushes.

"Come," said the marchioness, lightly, "sit down again and let us laugh over the whole affair together. You see, I would have nothing to do with either tragedy. I prefer comedy. Both of our arch-schemers have now taken flight from Rome; they were seized with terror at a street riot the other day, and they won't come back again, you may be sure, unless it be in the rear of a besieging army. So now we have the Cagliari palace quite to ourselves, and can sit and chat together all we please. But I must say good night; I've gossiped enough for one while, and I'm sleepy, too."

Once more the fire was extinguished and the phœnix made to yield a passage, after which Blanka found herself alone again. She shuddered at the thought of having lived for months with an open door leading to her bedroom. She debated with herself whether to stick her key in that door and leave it there permanently, while she herself sought another sleeping-room, or to yield to the charm of her unbidden guest and acquiesce in her plan of exchanging confidential visits. The strangeness and mystery of it all, and still more the hope that her neighbour might let fall an occasional word concerning Manasseh, at length prevailed over her fears and scruples, and determined her to receive the other's advances.

On the following evening she gave her servants permission to go to the theatre, — the play representing the defeat of the Austrian army by the Italians, — while she herself, after having her samovar and other tea-things brought to her room, took up her mandolin and struck a few chords on its strings. The reclining Sappho answered her, and a few minutes later there came a knock on the back of the fireplace.

"Come in!"

The phœnix rose, and the fair Cyrene appeared, this time in full toilet, as for a fashionable call, her hair dressed in the English mode, a lace shawl falling over her pink silk gown, from beneath which one got an occasional glimpse of the richly embroidered underskirt and a pair of little feet encased in high-heeled shoes.

"You were going out?" asked the princess.

"I was coming to see you."

"Did you know I was waiting for you?"

"I told you yesterday I should come, and I knew you were expecting me from your sending your servants away to the theatre."

"And you knew that too?"

"Yes, because they took mine along with them. So here we are all alone by ourselves."

The consciousness of being the only living creatures in a whole house has a delicious charm, fraught with mystery and awe, for two young women. Blanka took her guest's hat and shawl, and then proceeded to start a fire on the hearth. The fair Cyrene meanwhile caught up her mandolin and began to sing one of Alfred de Musset's songs, full of the warmth and glow of the sunny South. Presently the hostess invited her guest to take tea with her, and asked her at the same time her baptismal name.

The marchioness laughed. "Haven't you heard it often enough? They call me 'Cyrene.'"

"But that isn't your real name," objected Blanka. "You were not christened 'Cyrene.'"

"I use it for my name, however, and no one but my father confessor calls me by my real name, so that now I never hear it without thinking that I must fall on my knees and repeat a dozen paternosters in penance. Besides, my name doesn't suit me at all. It is Rozina, and I am as pale as moonshine. You might far better be called Rozina, for you have such beautiful rosy cheeks, and I should have been named Blanka. I'll tell you, suppose we exchange names: you call me Blanka, and I'll call you Rozina."

The suggestion seemed so funny to Blanka that she burst out laughing, and a woman who laughs is already more than half won over.

"Now, then," continued the other, "we can chat away to our heart's content. There's no one to listen to us or play the spy — a good thing for you to know, Rozina, because all your servants are hired spies. Your doorkeeper and his wife keep a regular journal of who comes in and who goes out, what visiting-cards are left, whom you receive, where you drive, — which they learn from your coachman, — whom you visit, and even with whom you exchange a passing word. Your maid reads all your letters and searches all your pockets. Even your gardener keeps an account of all the flowers you order; for flowers, you know, have a language of their own. Be sure you don't buy a parrot, else it will turn spy on you, too."

"Who can it be that is so suspicious of me?" asked the princess, in surprise.

"Have you forgotten the strict terms of your uncle's legacy, and are you unaware how slight an indiscretion on your part might furnish your relatives with a pretext for contesting your right to a share of the property? Do you forget, too, how trifling an error might result in the cutting off of your allowance from Prince Cagliari?"

"Well, let them watch me, if they wish," returned Blanka, composedly. "I have no secrets to hide from anybody."

"A rash assertion for a woman to make," commented the other, as she poured herself a glass of water. "How warm this water is!" she exclaimed, after taking a sip.

Blanka sprang up and offered to bring some ice from the dining-room.

"Aren't you afraid to go for it alone?"

"Certainly not; the lamps are all lighted."

While the hostess was out of the room, her guest turned over Blanka's portfolio of drawings, and among them found her outline sketch of the Colosseum.

"You sketch beautifully," commented the marchioness, upon the other's return.

"It is my only diversion," replied the princess.

"This view of the Colosseum reminds me of one I saw at the Rossis'."

"The artist may have chosen the same point of view," returned Blanka with admirable composure.

"I called on him at his studio lately," proceeded the marchioness. "I had heard one of his pictures very highly praised. It represents a young woman sitting on the gallery railing in the Colosseum, with the sunlight streaming on her through a red umbrella. The warm glow of the sunbeams is in striking contrast with the deep melancholy on the girl's face. I offered the artist two hundred scudi for the piece, but he said it was not for sale at any price."

Blanka felt as powerless in the hands of this woman as a rabbit in the clutches of a lion. The beautiful Cyrene closed the portfolio and exclaimed:

"Rozina, these men are terrible creatures! They make us women their slaves. But the woman's first and dominant thought must ever be to find some escape from her bondage."

With that she jumped up and ran out of the room, as if taken suddenly ill. Her hostess followed to see what was the matter, and found her sitting in a corner of the adjoining apartment.

"You are weeping?"

"Not at all; never merrier in my life!"

Nevertheless, two tears were shining in the fair Cyrene's eyes.

Next she ran to the piano and began to rattle off "La Gitana," which Cerito had just made so popular throughout Europe.

"Have you the score?" asked the marchioness, turning to Blanka.

"No, but I can play it from memory."

"Then play it to me, please."

Blanka complied, and the other began to dance "La Gitana" to her playing. The spirit and feeling, the coquettish grace and seductive charm, which the dancer put into the movements of her lithe form, challenge description. If only a man could have seen her then! From sheer amazement Blanka found herself unable to control her fingers, which struck more than one false note.

"Faster! Put more fire into it!" cried the dancer. But Blanka could not go on.

"Ah, you don't remember it, after all."

"I can't play when I look at you," was the reply; and the Marchioness Caldariva believed her. "You could drive a man fairly insane."

"As long as the men will torment us, we must be able to pay them back." She took Blanka's arm and returned with her to the other room. "Woe to him who invades my kingdom!" she continued. "He is bound to lose his reason. Do you wish to wager that I can't drive all Rome crazy over me? If I took a notion to dance the 'Gitana' on the opera-house stage for the benefit of the wounded soldiers, all Rome would go wild with enthusiasm, and the people would half smother me with flowers."

"I will make no such wager with you," returned Blanka, "because I know I should lose."

The beautiful Cyrene changed the subject and invited the princess to attend one of her masked balls, — "a masquerade party," she explained, "of only forty guests at the most, and those the chief personages of Roman society. I ferret out all their secrets and can see through their masks; but I use no witchery about it. My guests are admitted by ticket only, and my major-domo, who receives these cards, writes on the back of each a short description of the bearer's costume. So I have only to go to him and consult his notes to learn my guest's identity."

"But cannot your guests also procure information from the same source — for a consideration?"

"Undoubtedly. My domestics are none of them incorruptible."

Blanka laughed, and Rozina hastened to take advantage of her good humour.

"And now just imagine among these forty masks one guest who comes neither through the door, nor through the major-domo's anteroom, so that no card, no personal description, no cab-number, no information of any kind, is to be had concerning her from my servants. She is acquainted with all the secrets of those around her, but no one can guess her secret, or fathom her mystery. Meanwhile a young painter has taken his seat in one corner behind a screen of foliage, and sketches the lively scene before him. He is the only one who, with beating heart, guesses the name of the mysterious unknown. What do you say, — will this bewitching guest from fairyland deign to figure as the chief personage on my young artist's canvas ?"

"Before deciding, may I see a list of those whom you have invited ?"

"Certainly — a very proper request." The marchioness handed over her fan, the ribs of which were of ivory, and served the owner as tablets. They were covered with a miscellaneous list of well-known names from all classes, and the last among them was Manasseh Adorjan's. "You can order a costume of black lace, spangled with silver stars," the fair Cyrene went on ; "then, with a black velvet mask, you will be ready to appear as the Queen of Night."

Blanka offered no objection to this plan.

"I will admit you upon signal, through our secret passageway, into my boudoir, and from there you will pass, when the way is clear, into the ladies' dressing-room, and thence into the ballroom. With this fan of mine in your hand, you will, after some instructions from me, be able to puzzle and mystify all whom you address, while no one will be in a position even to hazard a surmise as to your identity. When you tire of the sport, come to me, pretend to tease me, and then turn and run away. I will give chase, and under cover of this diversion you will slip out of the room, and return to your own apartments by the same way you came, while I continue the hunt and summon all present to aid me in finding my mysterious guest."

Such was the speaker's influence over Blanka, that the latter could not give her a refusal. Accordingly, when the two parted, it was with the understanding that they were soon to see each other again at the marchioness's masquerade.

CHAPTER XIII.

A SUDDEN FLIGHT.

BLANKA sat in her room, with closed doors, preparing her costume for the masked ball. Affairs in the world outside had moved rapidly during the past few days. In the feverish excitement of that revolutionary period, mob violence was threatening to gain the upper hand. Shouts of boisterous merriment reached the princess from the street. From the adjoining wing of the palace, too, other sounds, almost equally boisterous, fell on her ear at intervals. The fair Cyrene was entertaining a company of congenial spirits.

Gradually the noise in the street grew louder, until it seemed as if a cage of wild animals had been let loose before the Cagliari palace. Suddenly, as Blanka stood before her fire, all her senses alert, she saw the glowing phœnix rise from its position, and her fair neighbour stood in the opening.

"Put out your fire, and let me in," bade the marchioness. "I have emptied my extinguisher. Don't you hear the mob storming my palace gates?

The soldiery who were summoned to restore order have made common cause with the rioters, and we are in frightful peril. Quick! Out with your fire, and let me and my guests through. We can make our escape by your rear door, and so gain the riverside in safety."

Blanka could not refuse this appeal. She opened the way for the marchioness and her motley company to pass out; then she herself, first closing the secret passage between the two wings of the palace, followed the other fugitives and, gaining the street by a wide détour, engaged a cab to take her to the Vatican.

"His Holiness receives no one this afternoon," was the announcement made to her at the door.

Almost in despair, and bewildered by the sudden turn of events which had thus cast her homeless on the streets, the princess returned to her carriage.

"Do you know where Signor Scalcagnato lives?" she asked the driver.

"Scalcagnato the shoemaker, the champion of the people? To be sure I do: in the Piazza di Colosseo. But if the lady wishes to buy shoes of him she should not address him as *Signor* Scalcagnato."

"Why not?"

"Because he will ask half as much more for them than if he were called plain *Citizen* Scalcagnato."

After this gratuitous bit of information the coachman whipped up his horse and rattled away toward the Colosseum with his passenger.

Arriving at the shoemaker's shop, Blanka was received by a little man of lively bearing and a quick, intelligent expression.

"Pst! No words needed," was his greeting. "I know all about it. I am Citizen Scalcagnato, *il calzolajo.* Take my arm, citizeness. Cittadino Adorjano lives on the top floor, and the stairs are a trifle steep. He is out at present, but his studio is open to you."

The young lady was reassured. The honest cobbler evidently did not suspect her of coming to meet his tenant by appointment, but took her for an artist friend on a professional visit, or perhaps a customer come to buy a picture. The shoemaker took the artist's place, in the latter's absence, and sold his paintings for him. Perhaps, too, the artist sold his landlord's shoes when that worthy was abroad.

Thus it was that Blanka took the offered arm without a misgiving, and suffered the cobbler to lead her up the steep stairway to the little attic chamber that served her friend for both sleeping-room and studio. It was as neat as wax, and as light and airy as any painter could desire. A large bow-window admitted the free light of heaven and at the same time afforded a fine view of the Palatine Hill. Leaning for a moment against the window-sill, in mute admiration of the prospect before her, the princess thought how happy a woman might be with this view to greet her eyes every day, while a husband who worshipped her and was worshipped by her worked at her side — or, rather, not *worked*, but *created*. It was a picture far more alluring than any that the Cagliari palace had to offer.

"Pst!" the cobbler interrupted her musing; "come and let me show you the portrait."

So saying, he conducted her to an easel on which rested a veiled picture, which he uncovered with an air of pride and satisfaction.

The feeling of rapture that took possession of Blanka at sight of her own portrait was owing, not to the fact that it was her likeness, — radiant though that likeness was with youth and beauty and all the charm of an ideal creation, — but to the thought that *he* had painted it.

"The price is thirty-three million, three hundred and thirty-three thousand, three hundred and thirty-three *scudi*, and not a *soldo* less!" announced the shoemaker, with a broad smile. Then he laid his fingers on his lips. "Pst! Not a word! I know all. It will be all right."

Blanka saw now that he had recognised her the moment she entered his shop.

"The citizen painter is not at home," continued the other, "but he will turn up at the proper time where he is wanted. Sun, moon, and stars may fall from heaven, but he will not fail you. No more words! What I have said, I have said. You can now return home, signorina, and need give yourself no further uneasiness. Whatever occurs in the streets, you need not worry. And finally" — they had by this time reached the ground floor again — "it will be well for you to take a pair of shoes with you, to make the coachman think you came on purpose for them. Here's a good stout pair, serviceable for walking or for mountain-climbing. You can rely on them. So take them along; you may need them sometime."

"But how do you know they will fit me?" asked Blanka.

"Citizeness, don't you remember the stone footprint of our Lord in the church of *Domine quo vadis?* And may not the footprint of an angel have been left in the sand of the Colosseum for a devout artist to copy in his sketch-book? Such a sketch is enough for the Cittadino Scalcagnato to make a pair of shoes from, so that they cannot fail to fit."

The princess turned rosy red. "I have no money with me to pay for them," she objected. "A footman usually accompanies me and pays for all my purchases; but to-day I left him at home, and I neglected to take my purse with me."

"No matter; I understand. I'll charge the amount

Here, take this purse and pay your cab-fare out of it when you reach the square. Don't go home in a carriage, but on foot. You needn't fear to do so, with a pair of shoes in your hand. If your gold-laced lackey were with you, you might meet with insult and abuse; but walking alone with the shoes in your hand, you will not be molested, and you will find all quiet at home by this time. Now enough said. I know all. You can pay me back later."

With that the little shoemaker escorted his guest to her carriage and took leave of her with a polite request — intended for the cabman's ear — for her further patronage.

Following the mysterious little man's directions, Blanka reached home unharmed, and found everything there as she had left it. Whatever violence the rioters may have allowed themselves in storming the marchioness's quarters, her own wing of the palace, for some reason that she could only vaguely conjecture, had been spared. After assuring herself of this, the princess tried on her new shoes, and found that Citizen Scalcagnato was no less skilful as a shoemaker than eminent as a politician and a party-leader.

The house was now still and deserted, although the sounds of riotous excess were faintly audible in the distance. The servants had evidently fled at the same time that Blanka and the marchioness left the palace. Looking out of her rear window, the princess noticed that her garden gate was open; it must have been left swinging by her domestics in their flight. She was hastening down-stairs to close it, when a man's form appeared before her in the gathering gloom, and she cried out in sudden terror.

"Do not be alarmed, Princess." The words came in a firm, manly voice that thrilled the hearer; she recognised the tones. Manasseh Adorjan stood before her. "I could not gain admittance by the front door," he explained, "so I went around to the garden gate."

"And how is it," asked Blanka, "that you have come to me at the very moment that I was seeking you?"

"I wished, first, to bid you farewell. I am going home, to Transylvania, for my people are in trouble and I must go and help them. As long as they are happy I avoid them, but when misfortune comes I cannot stay away. War threatens to invade our peaceful valley, and I hasten thither."

"Has the hour come, then, when you feel it right to kill your fellow-men?"

"No, Princess; my part is to restore peace, not to foment strife."

Blanka's hands were clasped in her lap. She raised them to her bosom and begged her fellow-countryman to take her with him.

The colour mounted to his face, his breast heaved, he passed his hand across his brow, whereon the perspiration had started, and stammered, in agitated accents:

"No, no, Princess, I cannot take you with me."

"Why not?" asked Blanka, tremulously.

"Because I am a man and but human. I could shield you against all the world, but not against myself. I love you! And if you came with me, how could you expect me to help you keep your vows? I am neither saint nor angel, but a mortal, and a sinful one."

The poor girl sank speechless into a chair and hid her face in her hands.

"Hear me further, Princess," continued the other, with forced calmness. "I have told you but one reason why I sought you here to-day. The other was to show you a means of escape from this place, where you cannot remain in safety another day. You must leave Rome this very night, and that will be no easy thing to accomplish now that all the gates are guarded. But I have a plan. Above all things, you must find a lady to take you under her protection, and that, I think, can be effected. Citizen Scalcagnato issues all the passports for those that leave the city by the Colosseum gate. From him I have learned that the Countess X—— is to leave for the south to-night. I have obtained a pass for you, and you have only to make yourself ready and go with me to the Colosseum gate, where we will wait for her carriage. She is a good friend of yours and cannot refuse to take you as her travelling-companion. Do you approve my plan?"

"Yes, and I thank you."

"Then a few hours hence will see you on your journey southward. I shall set out for the north, and soon the length of Italy will separate us. Is it not best so?"

Blanka gave him her hand in mute assent.

An hour later Manasseh and Blanka stood in the shelter of the gateway by which the countess was expected to leave Rome. They had not long to wait: the sound of an approaching carriage was soon heard, and when it halted under the gas-lamp Blanka recognised her friend's equipage. The gate-keeper advanced to examine the traveller's passport, and as the carriage door was thrown open Blanka hastened forward and made herself known.

"What do you wish?" demanded the liveried footman.

The princess turned and looked at him. Surely she had seen that face and form before in a different setting, but she could not recall when or where. So much was evident, however, that the speaker was more wont to give than to receive orders. Blanka turned again to the open carriage door and plucked at the cloak of the person sitting within.

"You are fleeing from Rome, too, Countess," said she. "I beg you to take me with you."

But the carriage door was closed in her face.

"Countess, hear me!" she cried, in distress. "Have pity on me! Don't leave me to perish in the streets!"

Her petition was unheeded. The footman drew her away and, as he turned to remount the vehicle, whispered three words in her ear:

"*È il papa!*"

It was the Pope, and he was fleeing! The spiritual ruler of the world, the king of kings, Heaven's viceroy upon earth, was flying for his life. The judge fled and left the prisoner to her fate. Blanka felt herself absolved from all her vows. She plucked from her bosom the consecrated palm-leaf, tore it to pieces, and threw the fragments scornfully after the retreating carriage. Then she turned once more to Manasseh.

"Now take me with you whithersoever you will!" she cried, and she sank on his bosom and suffered him to clasp her in a warm embrace.

CHAPTER XIV.

WALLACHIAN HOSPITALITY.

MANASSEH had not much choice of routes in making his way, with his companion, to Transylvania. After leaving Italy, he bent his course first to Deés, as the road thither seemed to offer no obstacles to peaceful travellers. Troops were, indeed, encountered here and there on the way; but they suffered Manasseh and Blanka to pass unmolested. Manasseh had fortunately provided a generous hamper of supplies, so that his companion was not once made aware that they were passing through a district lately overrun by a defeated army, which had so exhausted the resources of all the wayside inns that hardly a bite or a sup was to be had for love or money.

The weather was unusually fine, as the sunny autumn had that year extended into the winter. The Transylvanian was perfectly familiar with the region, and entertained his fellow-traveller with legends and stories of the places through which they passed. In the splendid chestnut forests that crowned the heights of Nagy-Banya he told her the adventures of the bandit chief, Dionysius Tolvaj, who kept the whole countryside in terror, until at last the men of Nagy-Banya hunted him down and slew him. In his mountain cave are still to be seen his stone table, his fireplace, and the spring from which he drank. Manasseh also related the adventures of bear-hunters in these woods, and told about the search for gold that had long been carried on in the mountains, and often with success, so that many of them were now honeycombed with shafts and tunnels.

Up from yonder valley rose the spirit of the mountains, a white and vapoury form, with which the sturdy mountaineers fought for the possession of the hidden treasure. In reality, however, it was no genie, but simply the fumes of sulphur and arsenic from the smelting works of the miners, who never drew breath without inhaling poison. And yet they lived and throve and were a healthy and happy people, the men strong, the women fair, and one and all fondly attached to their mountain home.

One evening Manasseh pointed to a town in the distance, and told his companion that it was Kolozsvar. As they drew nearer they saw that it was garrisoned with a division of the national guard. Manasseh was now among people who knew him well, and he did not expect to be asked to show his passport. But he was mistaken. Suddenly a hand was laid on his arm and a firm voice saluted his ears.

"So you thought you'd slip by me without once showing your papers, did you? A pretty way to act, I must say!"

Manasseh turned to the speaker, who proved to be a short, broad-shouldered, thick-set man, in a coarse coat such as the Szeklers wear, high boots, and a large hat. His arms were disproportionately long for his short body, his beard was either very closely cut or sadly in need of the razor, and his legs were planted widely apart as he confronted the travellers in a challenging attitude. Perhaps he wished to invite Manasseh to a wrestling bout.

Blanka looked on in surprise as she saw the two men fling their arms around each other. But it was not the embrace of wrestlers. They exchanged a hearty kiss, and then Manasseh cried, joyfully:

"Aaron, my dear brother!"

"Yes, it is Aaron, my good Manasseh," returned the stocky little man, with a laugh; and, throwing aside the jacket that hung from his neck, he extended his right hand to his brother. Then he turned to Blanka. "And this pretty lady is our future sister-in-law, isn't she? God bless you! Pray bend down a bit and let me give your rosy cheek a little smack of a kiss."

Blanka complied, and brother Aaron gave her blushing cheek much more than "a little smack."

"There," declared the honest fellow, with great apparent satisfaction, "I'm delighted that you didn't scream and make a fuss over my bristly beard. You see, I haven't had a chance to shave for four days. Three days and nights I've been here on the watch for my brother and his bride."

"And what about our two brothers, Simon and David?" asked Manasseh, anxiously. "Are they alive and well?"

"Certainly, they are alive," was the answer. "Have you forgotten our creed? Our life is from everlasting to everlasting. But they are really alive and in the flesh, and, what is more" — turning to Blanka — "they are sure to come to meet us and will expect to receive each a nosegay from their brother's sweetheart."

Blanka smiled and promised not to disappoint them, for there were still plenty of autumn flowers in the woods and fields.

"Yes," said Aaron, "you'll find posies enough on the road. We are going by a way that is covered with them. If you don't believe it, look at this bouquet in my hat; it is still quite fresh, and I picked it in the Torda Gap. Have you ever heard of the Torda Gap? There is nothing like it in all the world; you'll remember it as long as you live. It is a splendid garden of wild flowers, and there you will see the cave of the famous Balyika, — he was Francis Rakoczy's general. Thence it is only a step to the

Szekler Stone, and we are at home. Do you like to walk in the woods?"

"Nothing better!"

Here Manasseh pulled his brother's sleeve. "Do you really mean to take us by the way of Torda Gap?" he whispered.

"Yes," returned the other, likewise in an undertone; "there is no other way."

A blare of trumpets interrupted this conversation, and presently a squad of hussars came riding down the street, every man of them a raw recruit.

"Look, see how proud he is on his high horse!" interjected Aaron. "He never even looks at a poor foot-passenger like me. Halloa there, brother! What kind of a cavalryman do you call yourself, with no eyes for a pretty girl? Oh, you toad!"

With this salutation Aaron called to his side the young lieutenant who rode at the head of the hussars. He bore a striking resemblance to Manasseh, — the same face, the same form, the same eyes. Indeed, the two had often been mistaken for each other. There was only a year's difference in their ages. The young hussar gave his hand to Manasseh, and while they exchanged cordial greetings they looked each other steadfastly in the eye.

"Whither away, brother?" asked the elder.

"I am going to avenge my two brothers," was the reply.

"And I am going to rescue them," declared Manasseh.

"I am going forth to fight for my country," was the other's rejoinder.

Then the rider bent low over his horse's neck, and the two brothers kissed each other.

"But aren't you going to ask your new sister for a kiss, you young scapegrace?" cried Aaron.

The youthful soldier blushed like a bashful girl. "When I come back — when I have earned a kiss — then I will ask for it. And you will give me one, won't you, dear sister-in-law, even if they bring me back dead?"

Blanka gave him her hand, while a nameless dread showed itself in her face.

"Never fear!" cried the young man. As he gave Blanka a radiant look he saw tears glistening in her eyes. "I shall not die. *Egy az Isten!*"[1]

"*Egy az Isten!*" repeated the elder brother.

Then the young hussar put spurs to his horse and galloped to the head of his little company.

"Come, let us be going," said Aaron, and he led the way toward the farther end of the town, where the family owned a villa which they used whenever occasion called them from Toroczko to Kolozsvar. Adjoining the house lay a garden which was now rented to a market-woman, who made haste to prepare supper for the travellers. Blanka went into the kitchen and helped her, but not before the woman had been instructed in what was going on and warned not to breathe a word to the young mistress of the dangers that encompassed them all in those troublous times. It was Manasseh's desire to lead his bride home without giving her cause for one moment of disquiet on the way.

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[1] See preface.

"Can you sleep in a carriage?" the market-woman asked her, without pausing in her baking and boiling. "Now as for me, many's the time I've slept every night for two weeks in my cart when I was taking apples to market. One gets used to that sort of thing. The gentlemen propose to set out for Torda this very night, because to-morrow is the great market-day in Kolozsvar, and there'll be troops of peddlers and dealers of all sorts coming into town, and farmers driving their cattle and sheep and swine, so that you couldn't possibly make head against them if you should wait till morning."

Blanka readily gave her consent to any plan that seemed best to her conductors.

Aaron meanwhile had brought out three good horses from the stable and harnessed them to a travelling carriage. "Water behind us, fire before us," he remarked to Manasseh as he buckled the last strap.

Wallachian troops were holding the mountain passes about Torda, and had even threatened Toroczko; but thus far the inhabitants had not allowed themselves to be frightened. Now, however, there was a report that General Kalliani was approaching from Hermannstadt with a brigade of imperial soldiery. Consequently it was to be feared that a general flight from Torda to Kolozsvar would soon follow; and, when once the stream of fugitives began, it would be impossible to make one's way in an opposite direction. Therefore our travellers had not a moment to lose.

Blanka was by this time well used to travelling by night, and she entered cheerfully and without question into the proposed plan. A longing to reach "home," and perhaps a vague suspicion of the perils that threatened her party, made her the more willing to push forward. When danger braces to action, a high-bred woman's power of endurance is almost without limit.

Aaron drove, Manasseh sat beside him, and thus the entire rear seat was left to Blanka, who was so swathed and muffled in wraps and furs that she was well-nigh hidden from view. Despite all the plausible explanations, she came very near guessing the well-meant deceit that was practised upon her.

"Why, your horses are saddled!" she exclaimed to Aaron.

"Yes, to be sure," calmly replied the mountaineer.

"That's the custom in Transylvania; we put saddles on our carriage-horses just as in Styria they buckle a block of wood over the horse's neck."

Blanka appeared satisfied with this explanation of Transylvanian usage. Aaron gave his good Szekler steeds a free rein. They were raised in the mountains and could, if need were, trot for twenty-four hours on a stretch without food or water; then, if they were unharnessed and allowed to graze a little, they were able to resume the journey with unslackened pace. The driver had no occasion to use reins or whip: they knew their duty, — to pull lustily when the road led up-hill, to hold back in going down-hill, to trot on a level, to overtake and pass any carriage in front of them, to quicken their pace when they heard one behind, and to halt before every inn.

Aaron, turning half around on his seat, beguiled the time by telling stories to his fair passenger, to whom his fund of amusing anecdotes seemed inexhaustible. When at length, as they were ascending a long hill, he noticed that she ceased to laugh at his tales, but sat inert and with head sunk on her bosom, he put his hand into his waistcoat pocket and, drawing out an enamelled gold watch, pressed the stem and held it to his ear.

"Half-past twelve," he murmured.

The man himself was a gold watch encased in a rough exterior, a noble heart in a rude setting. His horny hands were hardened by toil, but he had a clever head on his shoulders; he was well endowed with mother-wit, quick at repartee, merciless in his satire toward the haughty and overbearing, cool and good-humoured in the presence of danger, — in short, a genuine Szekler, heart and soul.

When, then, his repeater had told him the hour, Aaron turned and addressed his brother. "The young lady is asleep," said he, "and now you and I can have a little talk together. You asked me how our two brothers came to be captured. Let me begin at the beginning, and you shall hear all about it. You know when freedom is first born she is a puny infant and has to be suckled. That she cries for blood instead of milk is something we can't help. So all the young men of Toroczko enlisted in the militia, — every mother's son of them, — and they are now serving in the eleventh, the thirty-second, and the seventy-third battalions. You ask me, perhaps, why we mountain folk must needs take the field when already we are fighting for our country all our life long in the bowels of the earth. You say it is enough for us to dig the iron in our mountains without wielding it on the battle-field; else what do the privileges mean that were granted us by Andreas II. and Bela IV., by which we are exempted from military service? It's no use your talking, Manasseh; you've been away from home. But had you been here and seen and heard your brother David when he stood up in the middle of the market-place, made a speech to the young men around him, and then buckled on his sword and mounted his horse, you would certainly have mounted and followed him. How can you quench the flames when every house is ablaze? All the young men were on fire and it was out of the question to dampen their ardour. Besides, this is no ordinary war; freedom itself is at stake, and that is a matter that concerns Toroczko. All the Wallachians around us, stirred up by imperial officers sent from Vienna, took up arms against us, and nothing was left us but to defend ourselves. The people took such a fancy to our brothers that there was no other way but to make them officers. You cry out against the good folk for letting their commanders be taken prisoners. But don't make such a noise about it." (Manasseh had thus far not once opened his mouth.) "You shall soon see that your brothers were no fools, and did not rush into danger recklessly. You know that soon after the Wallachian mass-meeting at Balazsfalva came the Szekler muster at Agyagfalva, and presently we found ourselves like an island in the midst of the sea. A Wallachian army ten thousand strong, under Moga's command, beset us on all sides, while we had but three hundred armed men all told, — just the number that Leonidas had at Thermopylæ. Our eldest brother, Berthold, who, since he turned vegetarian, can't bear to see a chicken killed for dinner, and is dead set against all bloodshed, advised us to make peaceful terms with the enemy. So we drew lots to see who should go out and parley with them, and it fell to our brother Simon. He took a white flag and went into the enemy's camp; but they held him prisoner and refused to let him go. Then David started up and went after him, with an offer of ransom for his release. But they seized him, too, and so now they have them both. Meanwhile the Wallachs are threatening, if we don't surrender to them and admit them into Toroczko, to hang our two brothers before our eyes. We on our part, however, turn a deaf ear to the rascally knaves, and would perish to the last man before we would think of yielding. It's no use your screaming in my ears, you won't make me change my mind. I'm ready to treat with people that are reasonable, but when they bite me I bite back. I agree with you it's a hateful thing to have two of our brothers hanged; noblemen are not to be insulted with the halter; their honour should be spared and their heads taken off decently. But what can we do? Can we hesitate a moment between two noblemen's deaths and the destruction of all the peasantry? One man is as good as another now. So you may make as much rumpus as you please, it won't do any good. I am taking you to Toroczko, and as our two brothers are as good as lost to us, you must take the command of the Toroczko forces. You have seen the barricade fighting in Vienna and Rome, and you understand such things. So, then, not another word! I won't hear it."

Manasseh had not uttered a syllable, but had permitted his brother to argue out the matter with himself.

"I don't gainsay you, brother Aaron," he calmly rejoined, "not in the least. Take me to Toroczko, the sooner the better; but we shall not get there by this road. Do you see that great cloud of dust yonder moving toward us?"

"Aha! What sharp eyes you have to see it, by moonlight too! I hadn't noticed it before. All Torda and Nagy-Enyed are coming to meet us. They must have set out about the same time we did, to make the most of the night. We can't get through this way, that's sure. But don't you worry. It's a sorry kind of a fox that has only one hole to hide in. Do you see that gorge there on our right? It leads to Olah-Fenes. The people there are Wallachs, it is true, but they side with us; to prove it, they have cut their hair short. Next we shall come to Szent-Laszlo, where Magyars live. So far we can drive, though it's a frightful road and one of us must walk beside the carriage and keep it from tipping over. We must wake up the young lady, too, and tell her to hold on tight, or she'll be thrown out. But never fear. The horses can be depended on, and the carriage is Toroczko work and good for the jaunt."

There was a halt, and Blanka awoke of her own accord. Manasseh turned to her, chatted with her a moment on the brightness of the stars and the clearness of the sky, then kissed her hand and bade her draw it back again under her furs, else it would get frost-bitten. Thereupon Aaron reined his horses toward the mountain gorge he had pointed out, and they began their dangerous journey over a rough wood-road that led through the ravine. At one point it ran along the brink of a precipice, and as they paused to breathe their horses the rumble of wagons on the highway from Torda fell on their ears, sounding like distant thunder in the still night. Then, to the north and south, red lights began to glimmer on the mountain peaks.

"How beautiful!" exclaimed Blanka, as she gazed at them. Little did she suspect that they were beacon-fires calling to deeds of blood and rapine.

A turn in the road at length conducted the travellers through a gap in the mountain range, and they had a view of the moonlit landscape before them. A noisy brook went tumbling and foaming down the ravine, and over it led a wooden bridge, at the farther end of which could be seen a rude one-story house surrounded by a palisade. Five smaller houses of similar architecture were grouped about it. The barking of dogs greeted the travellers while they were still some distance off, and the crowing of cocks soon followed.

"Do you hear Ciprianu's roosters?" Aaron asked his brother.

"So you are acquainted with Ciprianu and his poultry?" returned Manasseh.

"Yes, I know them well. Ciprianu is a Wallach, but a nobleman of Hungary for all that, and his poultry unique of its sort. The cocks are white, but in head and neck they bear a strong resemblance to turkeys, and they gobble like turkeys, too. They are a special breed and Ciprianu wouldn't part with one of them for a fortune. He guards them jealously from thieves, and that explains why he has so many dogs. As soon as he hears our carriage-wheels he'll come out on his veranda and fire off his gun — not at us, but into the air, to let us know he's awake and ready to meet friend or foe."

The barking increased, the dogs sticking their noses out from between the stakes of the palisade and joining in a full chorus. Presently a shot was heard from the front porch of the house.

"Oh, they are firing at us!" cried Blanka, startled.

"Don't be afraid, sister-in-law," Aaron reassured her; "that shot wasn't aimed at us." Then he shouted, in stentorian tones: "Don't shoot, Ciprianu, don't shoot! There's a lady with us, and she can't bear the noise."

At this there was heard a great commotion among the dogs, as of some one quieting the unruly beasts with a whip. Then the gate opened and a six-foot giant in a sheepskin coat, wool outward, and bearing a club, appeared. He exchanged greetings in Rumanian with Aaron, and the conversation that followed was likewise in that language, so that Blanka could not understand a word of it. The Wallach pointed to the signal-fires on the mountains, and his face assumed an expression of alarm. Finally he took one of the horses by the bridle, and conducted the carriage through the gate and into his stronghold.

"Why are we stopped here?" asked Blanka.

Aaron gave her a reassuring reply. "Ciprianu says it is not best for us to go any farther to-night, as the rains have washed out the road in some places, and we might get into trouble in the dark. So we must accept his invitation and spend the rest of the night under his roof."

Aaron had explained the situation only in part. The Wallachian's argument for detaining them had much less to do with water than with the fires on the mountain tops.

The dogs were kicked aside to make room for the strangers, and sundry villagers appeared out of the gloom to reconnoitre the new arrivals. The country peasantry never give themselves a regular night's sleep, but lie down half-dressed in order to get up occasionally and look around in house and stable, to make sure all is as it should be.

Ciprianu had a handsome daughter, as tall as himself and with regular features of the old Roman cast. At her father's call she came out, lifted Blanka like a child from the carriage, and carried her into the house. It was a pleasant little abode, built of smoothly planed oak beams and planks. The kitchen, which served also as entrance hall, was as neat as wax and cheerfully adorned with brightly polished tinware. The fire on the hearth was still smouldering, and it needed only a handful of shavings to make it blaze up and crackle merrily. The wall which separated the great fireplace from the next room was of glazed tiles, and thus the adjoining apartment was heated by the same fire that warmed the kitchen. Both the master of the house and his daughter were most cordial toward their guests. The father spread the table, while the girl put on the kettle and brought out the best that the house had to offer of food and drink, pressing the refreshments upon Blanka in words that sounded to her not unlike Italian, but were nevertheless quite unintelligible.

"They can both speak Hungarian," whispered

Aaron, when father and daughter were out of the room for a moment, "but these are times when they choose to forget all tongues except their own."

Blanka soon learned that her hostess's name was Zenobia. When they sat down to the table, Zenobia made as if to kiss her fair guest's hand; Blanka, however, would not allow it, but embraced the young woman and kissed her on the cheek.

This act was noted by the father with no little pride and satisfaction. Blanka could not understand his words; she could only guess his meaning by the gestures and the play of countenance with which a Wallachian knows so well how to convey his thoughts. Thus, when Ciprianu put his hand first to his head, then tapped Aaron on the shoulder, kissed his own fingers and then stretched them heavenward, made a motion with his head and raised his eyebrows, bowed low, stood erect again, thumped his bosom, and finally extended his great, muscular hands toward Blanka as if to caress her, she could not but infer that the Wallachian-Hungarian nobleman was proud of the courtesy shown to his daughter.

After this bit of eloquent pantomime, Ciprianu turned and hastened out of the room and into the courtyard, whence he soon reappeared amid a great cackling of poultry. He brought with him, tied together by the feet, a cock and a hen of that splendid breed that so strangely resembles, in head and neck, the proudest of Calcutta turkeys. This pair of fowls he presented to Blanka. She smiled her pleasure, and gladly accepted the gift, mindful of the new duties soon to be imposed upon her as a young housewife, and thinking that this present would be a welcome addition to her establishment. The generous host did not wait for his guest's thanks, but disappeared again from the room.

"Sister-in-law," said Aaron, "you little suspect the value of the present you have received. Even to his bishop Ciprianu has never given a cock and a hen of this breed at one time. So now we can sleep soundly in this house, for we have a sure proof that you have won its master's heart. With Ciprianu's cock and hen we can make our way unchallenged through the whole Wallachian army. They are as good as a passport for us."

Blanka laughed, unaware of the full significance of his words. She was like a saint walking over red-hot coals without once singeing the hem of her robe.

Ciprianu's house was, as is usual among the Wallachian nobility, well fitted for the reception of guests. Everything savoured of the householder's nationality, but comfort and abundance were everywhere manifest. Canopied beds were provided for all, only the master of the house, according to established custom, lay down before the kitchen door, wrapped in his sheepskin, and with his double-barrelled musket by his side. In an adjoining room stood two beds for Blanka and Zenobia. Aaron and Manasseh were likewise given a chamber in common.

Curiously enough, one is often most wakeful when most in need of sleep. All her surroundings were so strange to Blanka that she found herself wide awake and listening to the barking of the dogs, the occasional crowing of the cocks, the snoring of the master of the house, and his frequent mutterings as he dreamed of fighting with thieves and house-breakers. Then her companion began to moan and sob in her sleep, and to utter disjointed sentences in Hungarian, of which she had so studiously feigned ignorance a few hours before. "Oh, dear Jonathan," she whispered, passionately, "do not leave me! Kiss me!" Then she moaned as if in anguish.

Blanka could not compose herself to sleep. Only a wooden partition separated her from the room in which the two brothers slept. She could hear Manasseh turning restlessly on his couch and muttering in his sleep as if in dispute with some one.

"No, I will not let you go!" she heard him exclaim. "You may plunge my whole country in blood, you may baptise my countrymen with a baptism of fire, but I will never despair of my dear fatherland. Your hand has girt it round about with cliffs and peopled it with a peaceful race. It is my last refuge, and thither I am carrying my bride. With your strong arm restore me to my beloved home. I will wrestle with you, fight with you; you cannot shake me off. I will not let you go until you have blessed me."

The fisticuffs and elbow-thrusts that followed must have all spent themselves on poor Aaron's unoffending person. At length the elder brother wearied of this diversion and aroused his bedfellow.

"With whom are you wrestling, brother?" he cried in the sleeper's ear.

"With God," returned Manasseh.

"Like Jacob at Peniel?"

"Yes, and I will not let him go until he blesses me — like Jacob at Peniel."

"Take care, or he will put your thigh out of joint, as he did Jacob's."

"Let him, if it is his will."

With that Manasseh turned his face to the wall, on the other side of which lay Blanka, who likewise turned her face to the wall, and so they both fell asleep.

And the Lord blessed them and spake to them: "I am Jehovah, almighty. Increase and be fruitful. From your seed shall spring peoples and races; for you have prevailed with God, and shall prevail also with men."

CHAPTER XV.

BALYIKA CAVE.

THE sun rises late in November. When Blanka awoke, every one else in the house was already up. Manasseh met her with the announcement that their journey was thenceforth to be on horseback, at which she was as pleased as a child. So that explained why their carriage-horses had been saddled.

In the kitchen a plentiful breakfast stood ready, — hot milk, bacon spiced with paprika, snow-white mountain honey, long-necked bottles of spirits distilled from various fruits, cheeses rolled up in the fragrant bark of the fir-tree, — all of which was new to Blanka and partaken of by her with the keenest relish, to the great satisfaction of her host. What was left on the table by his guests he packed up and made them carry away with them, assuring them it would not come amiss.

Zenobia was to guide the travellers on their way. Blanka laughed with delight as she mounted her horse. At first she found it strange enough to sit astride like a man, but when she saw the stately

Wallachian maiden thus mounted, she overcame her scruples and even thought it great fun. The little mountain horses were so steady and sure-footed that it was like being rocked in a cradle to ride one of them.

The two young women rode ahead, while the men lingered behind a moment to drink a stirrup-cup with their host, who would not let them go without observing this ceremony. Entering the forest, Blanka accosted her companion.

"Zenobia, call me 'Blanka,' and speak Hungarian with me. You spoke it well enough in your sleep last night."

The Wallachian girl drew rein abruptly and crossed herself. "Holy Virgin!" she whispered, "don't lisp a word of what you heard me say, and don't ask me about it, either."

They rode on side by side up the slope of the mountain. Blanka was in high spirits. The turf was silvered with hoar frost, except here and there where the direct rays of the sun had melted it and exposed the grass beneath, which looked all the greener by contrast. A stately grove received the travellers. A silence as of some high-arched cathedral reigned, broken occasionally by the antiphony of feathered songsters in the trees overhead. A pair of wild peacocks started up at the riders' approach and alighted again at a little distance. The ascent became steeper. Horses bred in the lowlands must have long since succumbed to the strain put upon them, but Aaron's good mountain ponies showed not even a drop of sweat on their sleek coats.

Gaining the mountain top at length, the travellers saw before them a wild moor threaded by a narrow path, which they were obliged to follow in single file, Zenobia taking the lead. The sun was high in the heavens when they reached the end of this tortuous path and found themselves at a point where their road led downward into the valley below. A venerable beech-tree, perhaps centuries old, marked this spot. It was the sole survivor of the primeval forest that had once crowned the height on which it stood. Held firm by its great, wide-reaching roots, which fastened themselves in the crannies of the rock, it had thus far defied the elements. Its trunk half hid a cavernous opening in the mountainside, before which lay a large stone basin partly filled with water.

"Here we will rest awhile, beside the Wonder Spring," said Zenobia, leaping from her horse and loosening her saddle-girth. "We'll take a bite of lunch and let our animals graze; then later we will water them."

"How can we?" asked Blanka. "There is scarcely any water here."

"There will be enough before long," was the reply.

"That is why we call it the Wonder Spring: every two hours it gushes out, and then subsides again."

Blanka shook her head doubtfully, and, as if to make the most of the water still remaining in the basin, she used her hand as a ladle and dipped up enough to quench the thirst of her pair of fowls — for her valuable present had not been left behind.

Meanwhile Aaron had spread the lunch on the green table-cloth provided by good dame Nature, and had begun to cut, with his silver-mounted clasp-knife, a generous portion for each traveller. But Blanka declared herself less hungry than thirsty.

"The saints have but to wish, and their desires are fulfilled," was Zenobia's laughing rejoinder. "Even the barren rocks yield nectar. Hear that! The spring is going to flow in a moment."

A gurgling sound was heard from the cavernous opening behind the beech-tree, and presently an abundant stream of crystal-clear water burst forth, flooded the basin, and then went leaping and foaming over the rocks and down the mountainside into the ravine below. Blanka clapped her hands with delight at this beautiful appearance, and declared that if she were rich, she would build a house there and ask for no other amusement than to watch the spring when it flowed. She laughed like a happy child, and perhaps in all Transylvania, that day, hers was the only happy laugh that was heard.

Aaron gathered a heap of dry twigs and made a fire, at which he taught Blanka to toast bread and broil bacon, — accomplishments not to be despised on occasions like this.

In half an hour the spring ceased to flow. It stopped with a succession of muffled, gurgling sounds from the depths of its subterranean channel, ending finally with gulping down the greater part of the water that had filled the basin. Then all was still once more.

Meanwhile something had occurred to trouble Blanka's happiness. Two or three wasps, of that venomous kind of which half a dozen suffice to kill a horse, lured from their winter quarters by the smell of food, were buzzing about her ears in a manner that spoiled all her pleasure. Aaron hastened to her assistance, and suspecting that the intruders had their nest in the hollow beech, he made preparations to smoke them out. Setting fire to a bunch of dry grass, he inserted it in the hollow of the tree and confidently awaited results. A sound like the snort of a steam-engine followed, and presently flames were seen bursting from the top of the chimney-like trunk. The dry mould and dust of ages that had collected inside this shaft had now caught fire, like so much tinder, turning the whole tree in a twinkling into a mighty torch.

"Oh, what have you done?" cried Zenobia, starting up. "Do you know that you have killed my father and set fire to the house that sheltered you last night?"

Blanka at first thought the girl was joking, but when she saw Aaron's vexed expression and Manasseh's ruffled brow, she knew that the words must have a meaning that the others understood, though she did not.

"Quick!" exclaimed the Wallachian maiden. "Mount and away! You have not a moment to lose. I hasten back to my father. You can find your way down the mountain by following the bed of the brook. Night must not overtake you in this neighbourhood. Oh, Aaron, may God forgive you for what you have done this day!"

Out of the burning tree a pair of owls fluttered, blinded and panic-stricken, a family of squirrels scampered off to a place of safety, and a nest of serpents squirmed and wriggled away from that blazing horror. Yet neither owls nor squirrels nor serpents fled with more headlong haste than did our travellers. Zenobia galloped back the way she had come, while the two men took Blanka between them and clattered down the rocky bed of the now nearly dry mountain torrent.

Of all this Blanka could understand nothing. What great harm, she wondered, could come from the burning of an old beech-tree?

Toward evening the travellers found themselves on a height commanding a wide view of the surrounding country. To the north rose the cliff where they had lunched at noon, and where they could still see black smoke ascending in a column from the smouldering beech as from a factory chimney. To the southeast another column of smoke was visible, and toward the same quarter Torda Gap opened before them in the the distance.

Aaron said they must halt here and rest their horses, whereupon all three dismounted and Manasseh spread a sheepskin for Blanka to sit on; but she chose rather to go in quest of wild flowers.

"Your Blanka is a jewel of a woman!" exclaimed Aaron to his brother. "From early dawn she sits in the saddle, bears all the hardships of the journey, and utters not a sigh of weariness or complaint. With that filigree body of hers, she endures fatigues that might well make a strong man's bones ache, and keeps up her good cheer through them all. Nothing daunted by danger ahead, she makes merry over it when it is passed. Yet once or twice I thought she was going to lose heart, but she looked into your face and immediately regained her courage. But the hardest part of the journey is still to come. Turn your field-glass toward Monastery Heights, yonder, where you see the smoke. Do you find any tents there?"

"Yes, and on the edge of the woods I see the gleam of bayonets."

"That is the camp of Moga's insurgents, and it lies between us and the Szekler Stone. Every road leading thither is now unsafe for us. But hear my plan. The insurgents hold Monastery Heights, and we must ride past them, through the Torda Gap. The millers of the two mills that stand one at each end of the Gap are my friends. The Hungarian miller at Peterd has shut off Hesdad Brook to-day, to clear out the mill-race. He does it once in so often, and I know he is about it now. So we shall have no trouble making our way up the dry bed of the stream to the farther end of the Gap. The miller there has promised to give a signal if the road through the Torda woods is clear, and unless it is blocked by the insurgents we can push on at once to the saw-mill on the Aranyos, where a four-horse team is waiting for us with twelve mounted young men from Bagyon as escort. But don't wrinkle your brow, we sha'n't come to bloodshed yet awhile. A dozen Bagyon horsemen make nothing of dashing through the whole Wallachian army, and not a hair of their heads will be touched. We shall be shot at, but from such a distance that we shall never know it. We will tell the young lady it is the custom in our country to receive bridal parties with a volley of musketry. When we reach the Borev Bridge we are as good as at home, and we shall be there before any one can overtake us, I'll warrant."

"But what if the Torda woods are held by the enemy?" queried Manasseh.

"Then we will take up our quarters for the present in Balyika Cave. Everything is provided there for our comfort, and we shall not suffer. We'll wait until the danger passes. Near the Balyika Gate we shall find a signal: a cord will be stretched from one rock to another, and a red rag hung on it if danger threatens, but a green twig if all is well."

"And when you first proposed in Kolozsvar that we should go home by way of Torda Gap, did you know the perils we should have to face?"

"Certainly," replied Aaron. "You can read my heart, brother, like an open book, and I need not try to conceal anything from you. Do you suppose we should ever have taken up arms unless we had been forced to do so, even as you will exchange the olive-branch for the sword as soon as you find what is dearest to you in danger? You cannot do otherwise; the iron hand of destiny constrains you. You have brought your sweetheart with you from Rome; your honour as a man obliges you to make her your lawful wife. Our law, our canon, compels you to make your way home with her, for nowhere else can your wedding be duly solemnised. Suppose the enemy block your way: you are given a good horse, a trusty sword and a brace of pistols, and then, with thirteen loyal comrades, including myself, you clear a path, through blood if need be, to the altar whither it is your duty to lead your betrothed."

While the two men thus discoursed on war and bloodshed, Blanka was enjoying the late autumn flowers that the frost had spared. Indigo-blue bellflowers and red and white tormentils were still in bloom, while in the clefts of the rocks she came upon the red wall-pepper and a kind of yellow ragwort. She had gathered a great bunch of these blossoms when she had the good fortune to find a clump of bear-berry vines, full of the ripened fruit hanging in red clusters and set off by the leathery, dark green leaves, which never fall. The bear-berry is the pride of the mountain flora, and Blanka was delighted to meet with it.

"Are these berries poisonous?" she asked Aaron, with childish curiosity, as soon as she rejoined her companions.

He put one of them into his mouth to reassure her; then she had to follow his example, but immediately made a wry face and declared the fruit to be very bitter.

"But the berries will do to put in my bouquets for your two brothers who are coming to meet us," she said, as she seated herself on the sheepskin to rest a few minutes and to tie up her flowers.

At these words Aaron's eyes filled, but he hastened to reply, with assumed cheerfulness:

"In Balyika Glen we shall find a still more beautiful species of bear-berry. It, too, is a kind of arbutus, but of great rarity, and found nowhere else except in Italy and Ireland. We call it here the 'autumn-spring flower.' The stems are coral-red, the leaves evergreen, and the blossoms grow in terminal umbels, white and fragrant, late in the fall, while the berries do not ripen until the following autumn, so that the beautiful plant bears flowers and fruit at one and the same time, and thus wears our national colours, the tricolour of Hungary."

"Oh, where does it grow? Is it far from here?" exclaimed Blanka, eagerly, starting up from her seat. She had lost all feeling of fatigue.

"It is a good distance, dear sister-in-law," replied Aaron. "To the Torda Gap is a full hour's ride, and thence to Balyika Glen about as far; and I'm afraid somebody is tired enough already, so that we had best stay overnight in the mill and not push on until to-morrow morning."

"No, I am not tired," Blanka asserted. "Let us go on this evening," and she was ready to remount at once.

"But the horses ought to graze a little longer," objected Aaron, "and even then we shall fare much better if we walk down the mountain; it will be easier for us than riding."

With that he went off into the bushes and picked his hat full of huckleberries, returning with which he drew a clean linen handkerchief from his knapsack, used it as a strainer for extracting the juice of the fruit, and then presented the drink in a wooden goblet to Blanka. She left some for Manasseh, who drank after her and declared he had never tasted a more delightful draught. She seemed now fully rested and refreshed, and eager to resume their journey. Aaron put two fingers into his mouth and whistled, whereupon the three horses came trotting up to him. He called them by name, and they followed him as a dog follows his master, while Manasseh and Blanka brought up the rear. Thus the party descended the steep mountainside.

The Torda Gap is one of the most marvellous volcanic formations in existence. It is as if a mighty mountain chain had been rent asunder from ridge to base, leaving the opposing sides of the gorge rugged and precipitous, but matching each other with a rude harmony of detail most curious to behold. The zigzags and windings of the giant corridor, three thousand feet in length, have a wonderful regularity and symmetry in their bounding walls. The whole forms an entrance-way or passage of solid rock, the most imposing gateway in the world, and a marvel to all geologists.

The wonders of this mountain gorge, and the stories and legends that Aaron narrated as the travellers proceeded, made Blanka entirely unconscious of the difficulties of the way. After leaving the Peterd mill behind them, they were forced to use the bed of the stream for a road. Its waters were for the time being restrained, although numerous pools were still standing, in which numbers of small fishes darted hither and thither and crabs were seen in abundance. As the riders advanced through the rocky passageway, its walls came nearer and nearer together and left only a narrow strip of blue sky visible overhead, with a few slanting rays of the evening sunlight playing high up on one side of the gorge. At length the passage became so straitened that only three fathoms' space was left between the confining walls. When Hesdad Brook is at all full one can make his way through only with great difficulty and by boldly breasting its waters. Therefore it is that very few people have ever seen the gate of Torda Gap. Just above this narrow gateway is situated the natural excavation in the mountain-side, called from its last defender, Balyika Cave.

As the travellers approached this spot, Aaron rode on ahead, ostensibly to ascertain whether the water was still shallow enough to wade through, but in reality to look for the preconcerted signal and remove it before Blanka should come up. He had agreed with Manasseh, if the signal was favourable, to offer to show her the flower garden of Balyika Glen and to discourage all desire on her part to visit Balyika Cave, by alleging that it was the haunt of serpents; but if the signal should be unfavourable, he was to employ all his arts to make the young lady eager to inspect the cavern and pass the night there.

He soon returned, and reported that it would be easy to wade their horses through the gateway, after which they could go and view the wonders of Balyika Cave.

"But aren't there any snakes in the cave?" was Blanka's first and most natural inquiry. Every woman in her place would have put the same question. Ever since Mother Eve's misadventure with the serpent in Paradise, women have cherished a deadly enmity toward the whole reptile family.

"Yes," was Aaron's reply, "there are snakes there."

Manasseh drew a breath of relief, but this time he had mistaken his brother's meaning.

"We need not fear them, however," the elder made haste to add. "We will build a fire and drive them out. Our fowls, too, will be a still better protection for us; with their naked necks they will be taken for vultures by the snakes, and we shall have no trouble whatever."

Manasseh now knew that dangers surrounded them, and that they must pass the night in the cave. Aaron, however, put forth all his eloquence to depict the charms of the place, likening its cavernous depths to the groined arches of a cathedral, and telling how his ancestors had maintained themselves there for months at a time in the face of a besieging force. He assured Blanka that she would find it most delightful to camp there by a blazing fire; he and Manasseh would take turns watching while she slept, her head pillowed on a fragrant bundle of hay.

They passed through the giant gateway, and clambered up to Balyika Cave, a spacious chamber in the side of the cliff, rudely but strongly fortified by a stone rampart that had been built to guard the entrance. A wild rose-bush grew in the narrow doorway and seemed at first to refuse all admittance. Manasseh and Blanka waited without, while Aaron fought his way through the brambles, which tore at his leather coat without injuring it, and presently returned with three broad planks. He and Manasseh held the briers aside with two of them and laid the third as a bridge for Blanka to pass over unharmed. In a corner of the stone wall lay a pile of hay, and behind it a supply of pitch-pine torches, one of which

Aaron now lighted. Then, like a lord in his own castle, he issued his orders to his companions. Manasseh was to lead the horses up, one at a time, and stable them in the rude courtyard, while Blanka was instructed to sit on a stone and arrange her flowers and feed her poultry. Meantime the master of ceremonies made everything ready for the other two within the cave.

The cock and hen were soon picking the barley from their mistress's lap, while she busied her fingers with the manufacture of a red necklace of the hips that grew on the wild rosebush. That other necklace, the dandelion chain, was treasured by Manasseh among his most precious possessions. Soon the horses were led up, stalled and fed, and then their groom drew in the wooden planks, according to his brother's instructions, and carried them into the cave, leaving the wild rosebush to resume its guardianship of the doorway. After this Aaron came out and offered his arm, like a courteous host, to escort Blanka into the cavern. She was no little surprised, on entering, to find herself in a stately hall, clean and comfortable, and lighted and warmed by a cheerful fire of fagots in its centre. Near the fire stood a table, neatly spread with a white cloth, on which were placed glasses and a pitcher of fresh spring-water. Beside the table a couch, rude but comfortable, had been prepared for her repose.

"Aaron, you are a magician!" cried the young girl. "Where did you get all these things?"

At this question the good man nearly let the cat out of the bag by explaining that everything had long since been in readiness for their coming. But he checked himself and considered his answer a moment. To say that he had brought all this outfit in his knapsack would have been too obviously a falsehood, so he sought another way out of the difficulty.

"I told the miller," he replied, with a jerk of his thumb over one shoulder, "that we should stay the night here, and he sent these things forward by a short cut over the mountain."

Thus it was only the speaker's thumb, and not his tongue, that lied, by pointing backward to the mill just passed, instead of forward to the other mill at the upper end of Torda Gap.

Aaron now offered to show the wonders of this rock palace, which, like the Palazzo Cagliari, consisted of two wings, from the second of which a low and narrow passage led upward to the mountain spring whence the thoughtful host had procured fresh water for their table. The previous occupants of this abode seemed to have been provided with not a few conveniences.

Returning to the fireside, Blanka was easily persuaded to try the couch that had been spread for her. The three planks, laid on some flat stones and heaped with sheepskins and rugs, made a very comfortable resting-place even for a lady. Blanka demanded nothing further, except a glass of water, and then begged Aaron to tell her some more stories, to which she listened with her chin resting in her hand and her eyelids now and then drooping with drowsiness, despite the interest she took in the narrator's ingenious farrago of fact and fiction, of romance and reality.

He told her how Balyika, the last lord of this castle, had held it for years against the imperial troops; even after Francis Rakoczy's surrender he had refused to lay down his arms, but had maintained his position with a sturdy band of a hundred mountaineers. With this little company he waged bitter warfare against his foes, losing his followers one after another in the unequal contest, until he alone was left. Even then he refused to yield himself, but outwitted all who strove to kill or capture him. Finally he met the fate of many another brave man, — he was betrayed by the woman he loved. He had been smitten with a passion for the daughter of the Torda baker, the beautiful Rosalie; but her affections were already bespoken by the butcher's apprentice, Marczi by name, a youth of courage and activity. However, she deigned to receive the outlawed chieftain's attentions, her sole purpose being to entrap him and deliver him up to his foes.

One evening, when she went to keep an appointment with Balyika, she notified the village magistrate and the captain of the yeomen. These two took an armed force and surrounded the lovers' rendezvous, thinking thus at last to capture their man. But he cut his way through the soldiery, and, fleeing over the mountain, made straight for his cave in the Torda Gap, outstripping the pursuit of both horse and foot — with the single exception of the injured lover, Marczi, whom he could not shake off. The young man clung to his heels and chased him to the very entrance of his retreat, where, just as the robber chief was slipping through the opening of his cave, his pursuer hurled his hatchet with such deadly aim that it cleft the fugitive's skull, and he sank dead on the spot.

"And that was how the last lord of the cave came to his end," concluded Aaron.

"But what about Marczi and Rosalie?" asked Blanka.

The narrator proceeded to gratify her curiosity by making the young man fall into the hands of the Mongols, after which he was captured by a troop of Cossacks; and then, when Aaron was putting him through a similar experience with the dog-faced Tartars, his listener succumbed at last to the drowsiness against which she had been struggling, and the story was abruptly discontinued.

"I never heard that tale before, brother," said Manasseh, after assuring himself that Blanka was really asleep.

"Nor I, either," was Aaron's candid reply; "but in a tight pinch a man turns romancer sometimes. I don't know, though, what fables we can invent to keep the young lady here over to-morrow. You think up something, brother; don't let me go to perdition all alone for the lot of yarns I've been reeling off to your sweetheart."

"Very well," assented the other; "I'll set my wits to work. Now you lie down and rest a bit, while I stay up and tend the fire. At midnight I will wake you and lie down myself while you watch."

Aaron lay down with a bundle of twigs under his head for a pillow, and, muttering a snatch of a prayer, was fast asleep in a twinkling. Manasseh was now left undisturbed to devise something new and surprising against his brother's awakening. Tearing a leaf from his sketch-book, he wrote as follows:

"DEAR BROTHER AARON: — I cannot close my eyes in sleep while death threatens our brothers Simon and David. Nor can I endure the thought of my birthplace being turned into a bloody battle-field, and of the horrors of war invading the peaceful valley whither I am bringing my bride, and which has ever looked upon bloodshed with disapproval. It was my fond hope to give my wife a glimpse of mankind in something like its original sinless state, and to let her learn to know and worship the God of our fathers as a God of love and gentleness. I am seeking a way by which this cherished hope of mine may yet be realised. While the Lord watches over your slumbers, I go in quest of the insurgent leader. That which force and threats cannot effect may yet be accomplished by peaceful means. I go to rescue our brothers from imprisonment and death. No fears can hold me back, as no inducements could prevail on me to slip stealthily by their place of confinement and push forward to celebrate my wedding while they perhaps were being led out to execution. I go forth alone and unarmed, and I am hopeful of success. Meanwhile do you guard and cherish my beloved. Above all, take her away from this place early to-morrow morning. Our presence here is known to one man, and he may betray us. You know the way to Porlik Grotto; few people are even aware of its existence, so well is it hidden from the view of travellers. Thither you must conduct our companion, and I will join you there with our two brothers from Monastery Heights. I may perhaps be there before you. But if it should please God not to prosper my undertaking, take Blanka home with you, and, if the Lord preserves our family, treat her as a sister. She is worthy of your adoption. Break to her gently the news of my fate. In the accompanying pocketbook is all her worldly wealth, as well as my own savings. Take charge of it. My brother Jonathan resembles me in appearance, and is a much better man than I. To him I leave *all* that I now call mine.

"Do not betray to Blanka any anxiety on my account. If God be with me, who shall prevail against me?

"Your brother,

"MANASSEH."

CHAPTER XVI.

A DESPERATE HAZARD.

After finishing his letter, Manasseh took a number of banknotes out of his pocketbook and put them into his waistcoat pocket, and then softly slipped the pocketbook itself, with his letter, under Aaron's pillow. On Blanka's pure brow, as she lay asleep, he gently pressed a parting kiss, after which he heaped fresh fuel on the fire, stole out of the cave, saddled his horse, and rode away into the darkness.

The signal-fire on Monastery Heights showed him where to find the Wallachian camp. No outposts challenged his progress, and he made his way unmolested to the ruined monastery which sheltered the insurgents. Fastening his horse to a tree, he turned his steps toward the belfry tower that marked the position of the cloister and the chapel, which, as the only building on the mountain with a whole roof, served the Wallachian leader and his staff as headquarters.

Softly opening the door, Manasseh found himself in a low but spacious apartment. Twelve men were seated around a table on which stood a single tallow candle, whose feeble rays could hardly pierce the enveloping clouds of tobacco smoke. The company was engaged in that engrossing pursuit which, as is well known, claimed so much of the officers' time during the campaigns of the period, — they were playing cards.

One chair in the circle was empty. Perhaps its former occupant had gambled away his last kreutzer and left the room. At any rate, the newcomer advanced without hesitation and took the vacant seat. It may be that the players were too absorbed in their game to notice him ; or possibly they had so recently come together that they were not yet sufficiently acquainted to detect a stranger's presence ; or, again, the feeble light and the clouds of tobacco smoke may have rendered it impossible to distinguish one's neighbours very clearly. Whatever the reason, the stranger's advent elicited no comment. A pocketful of money furnished him all the language he needed to speak, and the cards were dealt to him as a matter of course. Opposite him sat the Wallachian leader.

The game proceeded and the stakes rose higher and higher. One after another the losers dropped out, until at last Manasseh and the Wallachian commander were left pitted against each other, a heap of coins and banknotes between them. Fortune declared for Manasseh, and he swept the accumulated stakes into his pocket. At this the others looked him more sharply in the face. "Who is he?" was asked by one and another.

"Why, you are Manasseh Adorjan!" exclaimed the leader at length, in astonishment. "What do you mean by this rashness?"

The faces around him assumed threatening looks, and more than one muttered menace fell on his ear; but the hardy intruder betrayed no sign of uneasiness.

"I trust I am among gentlemen," he remarked, quietly, "who will not seek a base revenge on a player that has won their money from them."

The words failed not of their effect. Honour forbade that a hand should be raised against the fortunate winner.

"But, Adorjan," interposed the leader, in a tone of mingled wonder and vexation, "how did you come here and what is your purpose?"

"Time enough to talk about that when we have finished playing," was the careless rejoinder. "First I must win the rest of your money. So have the goodness to resume your seats."

The company began to laugh. Clenched fists relaxed, and the men clapped the intruder jovially on the shoulder, as they again took their places around the table.

"Haven't you a spare pipe to lend me?" Manasseh asked his right-hand neighbour.

"Yes, yes, to be sure," was the ready reply.

Manasseh filled the proffered pipe, drew from his pocket a banknote which he rolled into a lighter, thrust it into the candle-flame, and so kindled his pipe, after which he took up his cards and began to play.

A faint-hearted man, on finding his own and his brothers' lives thus at stake, would have sought to curry favour by allowing his opponents to win. But not so Manasseh. He plundered the company without mercy, as before, and as before he and his *vis-à-vis* were at last left sole antagonists, while the others rose from their places and gathered in groups about these two. Manasseh still continued to win, and his opponent's supply of money ebbed lower and lower. The loser grew furious, and drank deeply to keep himself in countenance.

"Give me a swallow of your brandy," said Manasseh, but he had no sooner tasted it than he pushed the bottle disdainfully away. "Fusel-oil!" he exclaimed, making a wry face. "To-morrow I will send you a cask of my plum brandy."

"No, you won't," returned his antagonist.

"Why not, pray?"

"Because to-morrow you shall hang."

"Oh, no," replied Manasseh, lightly, "for that would require my personal presence, and I am needed elsewhere."

The Wallachian continued to lose. Finally, in his fury, he staked his last penny — "and your brothers' heads into the bargain!" he added, in desperation.

The other took him up and staked his own head in addition to the bundle of notes which he threw down nonchalantly before him.

They played, and again Manasseh won. A man less bold of temperament might have thought to gain his enemies' good-will by leaving his winnings on the table. But Manasseh knew better. His opponents, angered by their losses, called him a robber, but still respected him. Had he, however, been so timid as to leave the money lying there, they would have regarded his action as such an insult that he would have been compelled to fight the entire company, one after another, in single combat.

"Now, then," said the leader, "we have time to talk. Why are you here — to persuade us to release your two brothers and leave Toroczko in peace?"

"A man of your discernment can fathom my motives without asking any questions," replied Manasseh, with a courteous bow.

"Well, let us see how you are going to work to bring this about. Your brother David, like the simple rustic he is, thought to talk me over with Bible quotations. He preached me a sermon on the love of one's neighbour, Christ's commandments, the almighty power of Jehovah, and a lot more of the same sort, until at last

I grew tired of it and had him locked up to keep him quiet. Your brother Simon is a shrewder man; he has been to school at Kolozsvar. He came to me with threats in his mouth, delivered a long harangue on the constitution, the powers of the government, our past history, and kept up such a din in my ears that finally I had to shut him up, too. But you are the cleverest of the three; you have been trained as a diplomat, and have taken lessons in Vienna from Metternich himself. Let us hear what you have to say."

"Set my brothers free," returned Manasseh, boldly, "and promise me not to attack Toroczko; then I will give you sixteen fat oxen and twenty casks of plum brandy."

The Wallachian sprang to his feet and clapped his hand to his sword. "If you were only armed," he exclaimed wrathfully, "you should pay for your insolence by fighting me. Do you take me for an Armenian peddler to be chaffered with in that fashion?"

Manasseh kept his seat on the edge of the table, swinging one foot carelessly to and fro. "If you were an Armenian peddler," was his cool retort, "you would be far more sensibly employed than at present. But why so angry? I offer you what you most need, food and drink; and I ask in return what we most desire, peace."

"But what you offer us we can come and take in spite of you. You three brothers are now in our hands, and we have only to send word to the people of Toroczko that, unless they lay down their arms and surrender the town, we shall hang you from the turret of St. George Castle."

"There are five more of us brothers at home, and, furthermore, in order to reach St. George Castle you must push through the Gap or make your way over the Szekler Stone, and you know well enough that the men of Toroczko have held this valley in times past against the whole invading army of the Tartars."

"You forget that there is still another way to reach Toroczko."

"No, I do not forget it. You mean the bridge over the Aranyos. But our iron cannon guard that bridge, and your bushrangers are hardly the troops to take it."

"Well, then, look out of yonder window toward the west. Do you see that signal-fire, and do you know its meaning? It means that a division of regular troops, with artillery and cavalry, is on the way hither from Szent-Laszlo."

Manasseh burst into a laugh. "It means that a merry company of picnickers took their lunch this noon at the Wonder Spring, at the foot of the great beech-tree. The wasps came out and plagued them, so they stuck burning grass into the hollow trunk, and consequently the whole tree was soon in flames. That is what you see burning now."

"Manasseh, if you are lying to me!"

"You know me. You know I never lie. What I say is true. When I choose not to tell the truth, I hold my tongue. Last night I slept at Ciprianu's. There are no imperial troops to be seen for miles around. What is more, the Hungarian forces have left Kolozsvar. Whither have they gone? I do not know; but it might befall you, while counting on meeting with help, to stumble upon an enemy. After the first three Adorjans, you will encounter a fourth, Jonathan, and he will give you something beside Bible quotations and Metternichian diplomacy."

The Wallachian was visibly affected by this speech, but he sought to hide his concern, and cried out, in a harsh tone: "If you are trifling with me, Adorjan, you'll find you have trifled with your own life. If you have told me a lie, God in heaven shall not save you."

"But as I have not told you a lie, God in heaven will save me, and I beg you to tell me where I may lie down and sleep, for I am very tired."

"Shut him up in the bell-tower," commanded the Wallachian.

"Good!" cried Manasseh, with a laugh. "At least I shall be able to ring you up early in the morning."

"Inasmuch as you have offered us a supply of brandy and eighteen oxen," were the leader's parting words, "we will have another interview in the morning."

"Sixteen was the number," Manasseh corrected him.

A bed of hay under the bell was furnished the captive, and he was locked up for the night, after which the company he had left held a council of war.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN PORLIK GROTTO.

COMPLYING with his brother's instructions, Aaron broke up his quarters at Balyika Cave early the next morning, and, descending with Blanka to the bed of the stream, led her up the valley to Porlik Grotto, one of nature's wonders known to few and seldom visited. From the top of its high-arched entrance hung cornel-bushes with brown leaves and red berries, while luxuriant wild grape-vines, with pendant clusters of ripe fruit, climbed upward from below to meet them, the whole thus forming an almost perfect screen before the opening. Through the screen, however, an observant eye caught the gleam of the stalactites within; the sun's rays, piercing the foliage, lighted them up like so many sparkling chandeliers. But our two travellers' thoughts were not on the beauties of the place.

"If Manasseh should only come out now to meet us!" they both exclaimed at once.

"There!" cried Aaron, "we both wished the same thing, and we have a sort of superstition here that a wish so uttered by two at the same time is bound to be fulfilled."

But Manasseh did not appear.

"Look there," said Aaron, with forced cheerfulness, pointing out the wonders of the grotto; "see how the limestone pillars grow together from above and below, till they meet and make one solid column." And all the while he was thinking: "What if Manasseh should come back, not alone, but with our two brothers! Yet is it right to ask so much of fate? Will not Heaven be angry with me for cherishing such a wish? Ah, let Manasseh himself come, even if he must come alone and with evil tidings!"

"See there, my dove," he continued aloud to his companion, "how the arches extend back, one behind another, with balconies along the sides, just like a theatre, and high up yonder a perch for the gallery gods." Meanwhile he was saying to himself: "Oh, that brother of mine ought to have been here long ago if he was coming at all." Then, aloud to Blanka: "Hear me play on the organ up there, — for theatres have organs sometimes. You notice the pipes, side by side, some longer and some shorter, each for a different note. But you stay here, — the rocks are wet and slippery, — while I go up and play you a pretty tune."

With that he clambered up the side of the cavern to a series of stalactites that presented somewhat the appearance of organ-pipes, and drew the handle of his hatchet across them, assuring his listener the while that he was playing a beautiful melody. Blanka was expected to laugh at this, and had Manasseh only been there, she could have done so with a light heart.

"Don't you think this back wall looks like a stage curtain?" Aaron went on. "With a little stretch of the imagination you might take it for the curtain in the Kolozsvar theatre, with Apollo and the muses painted on it. One feels almost like stamping one's feet, to make it go up and the play begin." But the undercurrent of the speaker's thoughts was quite different. "What if Manasseh shouldn't come by noon — by nightfall?" he was asking himself. "Then what is to become of this poor girl?" Aloud once more: "That lad Manasseh must have made a little mistake — just like these young men! He probably took the longer way, instead of following my advice. But just look out toward the entrance, and see how the sun shines in through the leaves and lights up the whole grotto like a fairy palace."

Blanka, however, was feeling so heavy of heart and, in a vague way, so fearful of impending misfortune, that she was in no mood to enjoy the splendours around her. She crossed her hands on her bosom and, in the half-light of this mysterious subterranean cathedral, yielded to the awe-inspiring influence of the place and gave utterance, in a subdued chant, to these words of the psalmist:

> "Hear me, O God, nor hide thy face,
> But answer, lest I die."

Aaron could control his feelings no longer. Throwing himself down on his face, he began to sob as only a strong man can when he is at last moved to tears, not by any selfish grief, but by the very burden of his love and anxiety for others.

But at that moment the psalm was broken off, and Aaron heard himself called three times by name. He rose to his knees and looked toward the opening of the grotto, where a glad and unexpected sight met his eyes. Glorified by the flood of light that poured in from without, appeared the forms of three men, the middle one being the tallest and stateliest. They were Manasseh and his two brothers, David and Simon.

Aaron sprang up and threw himself on them with an inarticulate cry like that of a lioness recovering her lost cubs. Embraces and kisses were not enough: he bore them to the ground and thumped them soundly on the back in the excess of his emotion.

"You rascal, you good-for-nothing, you shameless rogue, to worry me like that!" he exclaimed, accosting now one, now the other of his two lost brothers, after which he embraced them both once more.

"And am I of no account?" asked Manasseh. "Have I no share in all this?"

"You are your brothers' father," Aaron made answer, "before whom they prostrate themselves, even as the sheaves of Joseph's brethren bowed before his sheaf. We are all your humble slaves." So saying, he threw himself at Manasseh's feet and embraced his knees. "Torda Gap is, indeed, a place of wonders, but the greatest wonder of all you have wrought in rescuing your brothers."

This unrestrained outburst of joy opened Blanka's eyes and made her see that there was far more behind the meeting of these brothers than she had at first suspected. She knew now that the vague dread which had oppressed her, and from which she had sought relief in sacred song, had not been unfounded. Thus it was that she felt all the more impelled to take up the psalm where she had broken off, and to pour out her gladness in the concluding lines:

"He hears his saints, he knows their cry,
  And by mysterious ways
Redeems the prisoners doomed to die,
  And fills their tongues with praise."

Much rejoicing then followed, and the two brothers, whom Manasseh now presented to Blanka, told her all about the preparations made for receiving the bridal party at the Borev Bridge. Then all five sat down and emptied the lunch-basket with which Ciprianu had provided his guests; for thenceforth they would not need to carry their supplies with them. Toward noon they mounted their horses, David and Simon taking Blanka between them, and the other two bringing up the rear.

"Now tell me all about it," began the elder brother, as he rode a little behind with Manasseh. "You must have had the eloquence of Aaron and the magician's power of Moses, to prevail on Pharaoh to let your people go."

"I have wrought no miracle and used no eloquence," was the reply. "But I showed our foes neither fear nor haughtiness. I joined their circle, but did not spoil their entertainment. They questioned me, and I told them the truth. I asked them for peace, and offered them a price that I thought we were able to pay."

"How high a price?" asked Aaron.

"Sixteen oxen and twenty casks of plum brandy," was the matter-of-fact reply.

"If my arm were only long enough, wouldn't I box your ears!" exclaimed Aaron, by way of giving vent to his admiration.

"They wished to do something of the sort to me up yonder, too, when they heard my offer," returned the other. "But then they reconsidered the matter, and at last came to see that it was a very fair proposal, and one that needed no lawyer or interpreter to make clear to them. They all understood it, and finally declared themselves satisfied."

"But where did you get the two horses for our brothers?"

"I bought them, and I gave a price, too, such as is paid only for the best English thoroughbreds; but half of the money was what I won from the sellers themselves last night."

"So you have been playing cards with the Amorites, you godless man!"

"They held me prisoner till morning, while they took counsel together what to do with me and my two brothers. Some of them were for sending our heads, minus our bodies, to Toroczko, with a demand to surrender the town, else they would storm it and not leave one stone on another. But the upshot was that they led me out in the morning and told me my terms of peace were accepted. They abandon their plans against Toroczko, disperse to their homes, and promise henceforth to be our good neighbours, as heretofore."

"Did they swear to this?"

"Before the altar, and a priest administered the oath."

"With two candles on the altar?"

"Yes."

"Then they will keep their word."

"And I, as plenipotentiary and envoy extraordinary, gave them a written and sealed pledge to restrain my people from all acts of hostility against them."

"That will cost you a hard fight when you get home."

"But I shall win. The Wallachians will respect the peace, and we shall avoid all contention with them. Their leader, when he handed me our passport, said to me: 'You now have no further cause for uneasiness so far as we are concerned. My comrades and I will do your countrymen no further harm. As to the supplies offered by you, we accept them as a gift, not as a ransom. One parting word I have to add, however, and I bid you mark it well: we cannot promise you that some day a renegade from your own midst may not plunge your town into war and bloodshed.' With that we shook hands and kissed each other; and I can assure you positively that from here to the Aranyos our way will be clear."

"But how did you win them over so easily, I should like to know? Surely, the sixteen oxen and a few casks of brandy could not have done it."

"I gained my end simply by telling the truth. I told them about our setting the beech-tree on fire. They had taken it for a signal, and the mistake might have cost them dear."

"And did they believe you?"

"No, they doubted my word and discussed the matter a long time in their council, one party being strongly opposed to any change in their preconcerted arrangements; and this faction pressed urgently for my immediate execution."

"What, then, was it that saved you?"

"A mere chance — no, it was Providence, rather. It was a heart that beat with warm human feeling and a will that was prompt to act. In the midst of their discussion a messenger came from Ciprianu and confirmed the truth of my words."

"From Ciprianu? Then the messenger must have ridden all night."

"Yes, through a trackless wilderness and over rugged mountains."

"I do not see how mortal man could have accomplished it!" exclaimed Aaron, shaking his head.

"It was not a man; it was a woman that effected the impossible. She came to Monastery Heights to attest the truth of my statement by assuring the insurgents that what they took for a signal-fire was merely the result of an accident. The woman who saved us three from death was Zenobia."

At this point Blanka interrupted the conversation of the two brothers. She laughingly demanded to know what they were so earnestly discussing together.

"We can't agree on what guests to invite to our wedding," was Manasseh's ready reply. "Aaron would have only the immediate family, but I am in favour of inviting all our friends. What are your wishes in the matter, my angel?"

"I have no relatives or friends that I can invite to my wedding," answered Blanka, gently, "but I shall feel very happy if all your family can be present, even to your youngest brother, whom we met in Kolozsvar. You must send for him to come home."

"He will be there, dear heart," Aaron assured her.

"And stay! I have a friend, after all, — a friend that I have made since coming into this country, and should much like to see at my wedding. It is Zenobia, Ciprianu's daughter."

At sunset they reached the Aranyos River, beyond which lay the longed-for home, the happy valley which, from Manasseh's description, had so often been the subject of Blanka's dreams. At last she was to see Toroczko.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TOROCZKO.

It was a new world to Blanka, — that busy mining community, where clouds of black smoke from the tall chimneys of the smelting works and iron foundries met the eye in every direction, and the cheerful hum of toil constantly saluted the ear.

The Adorjan family gave the newcomer a most hearty welcome. With Anna, Manasseh's twin sister, the girl whom Benjamin Vajdar had so cruelly wronged, Blanka felt already acquainted. They embraced without waiting for an introduction, and when they drew back to scan each other's faces, they could hardly see for the tears that filled their eyes. Blanka was surprised, and agreeably so. She had prepared herself to see a face stamped with the melancholy of early disappointment, whereas she now beheld a fresh, rosy-cheeked countenance, golden locks, and blue eyes in which no tears had been able to dim the dancing light of a lively and cheerful temperament. Other women there were also in the family, — Rebecca, Berthold's wife, and Susanna, the helpmate of Barnabas, with a little circle of children around each.

The home-coming of the long-absent brother with his betrothed was celebrated, in accordance with time-honoured custom, with a great dinner that filled the spacious family dining-room to its utmost. Blanka could not sufficiently admire the skill and patience with which Susanna directed the feast and ministered to the varied wants and the individual tastes of so many guests. The eldest brother and his family were vegetarians and would touch no meat, but indulged freely in milk and eggs, butter and cheese. With them sat Doctor Vernezs, who was even stricter in his vegetarianism; the sole contribution from the animal kingdom that he allowed in his diet was honey. Brother Aaron sat beside Blanka, and partook freely of a dish of garlic that had been provided especially for him. He offered some to Blanka.

"I can eat this all my life," said he, with a roguish twinkle in his eyes, "but you only eleven weeks longer."

She understood the allusion. In Szeklerland a lover and his sweetheart bear themselves with much decorum and mutual respect throughout the entire period of their engagement. Only after the wedding do they exchange the first kiss.

Anna wished to come to her new friend's aid at this embarrassing juncture. "It won't be so long as that, Aaron!" she exclaimed.

"Let us reckon it up, my little turtle-dove," returned the brother. "To-morrow we will tell the parson that our sister Blanka wishes to join our communion. The law requires her to wait two weeks after this first announcement and then to go and declare her purpose a second time. After that follow six weeks for the divorce proceedings. That makes eight weeks. Then the banns have to be published three successive Sundays, and so we make out the eleven weeks, as I said. For seventy-seven days and nights, then, our peach-blossom will be your companion, sister Anna."

Anna and Blanka embraced each other with much affection. The latter showed no embarrassment at Aaron's plain speech.

"I will add five days to the seventy-seven," said she, with a smile.

"How so?" asked the brother and sister.

"Because I shall not go to the parson to-morrow, but shall wait until after Sunday. I am going to your church on that day, and till then I can't tell whether I wish to belong to it or not."

This prudent resolve met with Aaron's hearty approbation.

It was not long before Anna and Blanka became the warmest of friends. They shared the same room together, and the newcomer was allowed to look over all her companion's books, drawings, — for she, like her twin brother, was an artist, — keepsakes, and treasures of every sort. One day she came upon something that made her start back as if stung by an adder. It was a little portrait in an oval frame, a man's face, highly idealised by the artist, and yet strikingly true to life. Evidently the hand of love had depicted those lineaments. The eyes were bright, the lips wore a proud smile, the whole expression was one to charm the beholder. It was Benjamin Vajdar's likeness, and no ghost could have given Blanka a greater start. It was as if her most hated foe had pursued her into paradise itself, to spoil her pleasure there.

Anna noticed her friend's involuntary movement, and she sighed deeply. "Did Manasseh tell you about him?" she asked.

"I know him well," replied Blanka, and she could not control an accent of abhorrence in her voice as she spoke.

Anna clasped her companion's hand in both her own. "I beg you," she entreated, in tones at once sad and tender, "if you know aught ill of him, do not tell it me."

"You still love him?" asked the other, in compassion.

The young girl sank down on the edge of her bed and hid her face in her hands. "He has killed me," she sobbed; "he has done much that a man, an honourable man, ought not to do; and yet I cannot hate him. We may say, 'I loved you yesterday, to-morrow I shall hate you,' and we may act as if we meant it; but we cannot really *feel* it."

"My poor Anna!" was all Blanka could say.

"I know he is dishonourable," admitted the girl; "there are women here that report everything to me, thinking thus to cure me. But what does it avail? A sick person is not to be made well with words. How many a woman has waited for the return of an absent lover who may perhaps have gone around the world, or to the north pole, and who yet cannot get beyond the reach of her love and yearning!"

"If it were only the earth's diameter that lay between you!" murmured Blanka.

"True," replied Anna, resting her head on her hand; "the wide world is not so effective a barrier as a bewitching face that has once thrust itself between two loving hearts. That is harder to circumnavigate than the earth itself."

"If a pretty face were all that stood between you—" began the other once more, sitting down beside her friend and putting her arms about her.

"Yes, yes, I know," the poor girl interrupted; "the whole world and heaven and hell stand between us. All the laws of honour, of faith, and of patriotism, tear us asunder. I cannot go to him where he is, but yet it may be that he will come back to me — some day."

"Do you think so?"

"I believe it as I believe in one God above us. Not that I think we could now ever be happy together; but I am convinced that the road which he took on going away from here will some day bring him back again to our door. Broken and humbled, scorned and repulsed by all the world, he will then seek the one remaining asylum that stands open to him, and he will find one heart that still beats for him from whom all others have turned away."

The speaker rose from her seat and stood erect, her face all aglow with noble emotion. Was it an angel in love with a devil?

"See!" she continued, pointing to the little portrait, which was encircled by a wreath of immortelles, "this picture here in my room gives daily proof how lasting a thing love is in our family. My brothers all hate him with a deadly hatred, and yet they spare his likeness because they know that I still love him; they leave the little picture hanging in my room, nor offer to offend me by proposing another marriage for me. They know how deep is my love, and they respect my feelings. Oh, I beg you, if you have reason to hate this man, yet suffer his portrait to keep its place, and turn your eyes away from it if it causes you offence."

But Blanka hated the man no longer.

"Now I must not let you see me in tears," said Anna, briskly. "I must not make myself a killjoy in the family. I am naturally of a happy, cheerful temperament, and interested in all that goes on around me. My face shall never frighten people by being pale and wobegone. Just look in the glass! I am as rosy-cheeked as you."

With that she drew Blanka to the mirror, and began to dispute with her as to which could boast the more colour.

"You are happy," she continued, "and will be still happier. Manasseh will turn the earth itself into a paradise for you; just wait till you know him as I do, to the very bottom of his heart."

Blanka could not but smile at the sister's proud claim. Yet Anna was in earnest.

"Perhaps you don't believe me," said she. "Have you ever seen him in anger, with an enemy before him?"

"Yes."

"How did he look?"

"On his forehead were two red spots."

"Yes, and further?"

"His eyes glowed, his face seemed turned to stone, his bosom heaved, and he strove with himself until gradually he recovered his self-control; then his features relaxed, he smiled, and presently he spoke as coolly and collectedly as possible."

"Then you have never seen him really aroused," affirmed the sister, "as I saw him once, when with one hand he seized a strong man who had wronged him, and threw him down with such force that all his family had to hasten to help him up. When he speaks in wrath he can strike terror into a multitude, and he is such a master of all weapons of warfare that no one can vie with him. Now, then, have you ever really learned to know him?"

"Indeed, I think not," returned Blanka, in surprise.

"And hear me further," Anna went on. "When our house witnessed the sad event that spread a widow's veil over my bridal wreath, our whole family was terribly wrought up. My brothers swore to kill the man wherever they found him, — all but Manasseh. Nor did I seek to allay their wrath, knowing but too well that it was justified. But I also knew that they would never go forth into the world to hunt him down. To the people of Toroczko it is an immense undertaking to go even beyond the borders of Transylvania, and, as a general rule, no power on earth could drag one of them to Vienna or Rome. But Manasseh, I knew, must meet with the fugitive, as the two were to be dwellers in the same city and members of the same social circle. Manasseh, however, said not a word, and it was on him that I used all my influence. Still wearing my wedding-dress, I went to his room, where he was preparing for his journey. It happened that he was just putting a brace of pistols into their case; one of them he still held in his hand. I went up to him, threw myself on his bosom, and appealed to him. 'Manasseh,' I pleaded, 'my heart's treasure, unless you wish to kill me too, promise not to kill that man, — not to send his wretched soul out of this world.' Manasseh looked at me: his eyes glowed, as you have described, and two red spots burned on his forehead; his face turned hard, like that of a statue, and while he panted and struggled with the demon in his bosom, the pistol-barrel bent in his clenched hands like a wax taper, and so remained. I was wonder-struck. 'See!' I cried, 'you cannot shoot now any more with that pistol. So let him go; don't lay a finger on him.' Then my brother embraced and kissed me, and, lifting his hand to heaven, said, 'I promise you, sister Anna, that for your sake I will not kill the man, but will let him live.'"

How her lover's image grew in Blanka's heart and assumed larger proportions as she listened to this recital! The twin sister was the brother's complement. It was necessary to know the nature of the one in order to understand that of the other. Hitherto Manasseh's self-control in foregoing all revenge had excited Blanka's wonder only; she had thought that the secret of this self-mastery was to be found in a rigid dogma only, but now she perceived that what really shielded the wretched culprit was the magic influence of a woman's faithful heart that could cease to love only when it ceased to beat. The pledge won from him by his sister Manasseh had come to regard as no less sacred than the articles of his faith. Thenceforth he commanded not merely the love of his betrothed, but her adoration.

Blanka soon found herself leading a life that differed in every respect from that which she had so recently quitted. In the Cagliari palace she had been left entirely to herself, and when she went abroad it had been only to witness scenes of intrigue and envy, dissipation and frivolity, hypocrisy and deceit, on every side. But in her new home she found a large family of honest souls living in loving harmony under one roof, all its members engaged in active work for the common good, and sharing at a common table the bread that they earned. Every joy, every sorrow was common to all, and so the newcomer was at once claimed as a sister by all alike, and immediately became a universal favourite. Work was found for her, too, every one assuming that she would far rather work than be idle; and, indeed, she would gladly have engaged in any toil, however severe, but the others would not let her overtax her strength in labours for which they were much better fitted than she. A task was found for her, however, exactly suited to her capacity, — the keeping of the family accounts. She received a big book, in which she entered the current expenses and receipts, with all the details of the family housekeeping that called for preservation.

After the working days of the week came Sunday, the Lord's day. How Blanka had looked forward to that first Sunday, how often pictured to herself the Toroczko church and its Sabbath service! It was a simple structure, with four blank white walls, and a plain white ceiling overhead. A gallery ran across each end of the room, and in the middle stood the pulpit, with the communion table before it. Men and women, youths and maidens, entered the sacred house through special doors. First came the young men and took their places in the galleries, the students all gathering in a body on the same side as the organ. Next entered the married men in the order of their age, the wardens — or, as they were popularly known, the "big-heads" — taking their seats in the first pew facing the pulpit. On the left of the pulpit were seated the foremost families of the place, with the Adorjans at their head.

For the first time Blanka now saw the people assembled in their holiday attire, a costume peculiar to the place, and showing a mixture of Hungarian and German dress. The men wore black dolmans faced with lamb's fleece, and further decorated with rows of carnelian and amethyst buttons, the setting of the stones being silver. Under the dolman was worn a waistcoat of fine leather embroidered with threads of silk and gold, and around the waist was girt a belt, as broad as one's hand, of red leather handsomely trimmed with strips of many-coloured skins. To complete this imposing outfit, there was thrown over one shoulder a handsome cloak richly embroidered with piping-cord, and furnished with a high collar made from the fur of the fox. A large silver brooch held the mantle together at the breast, while six rows of silver clasps adorned it on each side. The whole costume was luxurious in its appointments, and yet no one would presume to find fault with it on that score. The wearer had earned his adornment with the work of his hands.

As soon as the men were seated, the women entered. A Parisian modiste would have been put to the blush by the ingenuity of design displayed by these countrywomen's costumes. The dazzlingly white linen, the tasteful combination of lace, embroidery, and furbelows, the handsome bodice and woven belt, the richly trimmed cloaks, the skirts hanging in many folds, the silk pinafores, the black lace caps set off by white veils disposed in picturesque puffs and creases, — all betrayed a wealth of fancy and nicety of taste on the wearer's part that would be hard to match.

After the matrons were seated, the maidens came in through the fourth and last door, entering now in pairs, now singly, and sat down on the two sides of the house, behind the married women. Finally the children were admitted, — a splendid phalanx, a company of angels of the Murillo and Bernini type.

The pride of the Toroczko church is its people. The churches of Rome boast many a masterpiece of early Italian art on their walls, but their worshippers are ragged and dirty. The walls of the Toroczko temple are bare, but the faces of its congregation beam with happiness. No works of sculpture, resplendent with gold and silver and precious stones, are to be seen there. The people themselves are arrayed in costly stuffs and furnish the adornment of the house.

After a simple opening prayer, the pastor ascended the pulpit and addressed his flock, in words intelligible to all, on such themes as patriotism, man's duty to his fellow-man, the blessings of toil, the recompense of good deeds in the doer's own bosom, and God's infinite mercy toward his children. In his prayer the preacher referred to Jesus as the beloved Son of God, the model for mankind to follow, but he did not deny salvation and paradise to those that chose other leaders for their guidance.

After the service Blanka asked Aaron and Berthold to go with her to the preacher as witnesses while she announced her purpose to join the church. After making this declaration in due form, she was reminded that she had two weeks in which to consider the matter carefully, at the end of which, if she was still of the same mind, she was to come back again and renew her declaration.

"Two weeks longer," sighed Blanka, "and then six weeks more for the divorce!"

Aaron heard her sigh, and hastened to say: "If we make a special effort we can shorten this period. Our law directs that an applicant for a divorce must either be a resident of, or own an estate in, Transylvania. Therefore, if you could acquire a piece of land here, we should only have to wait for the consistory to assemble and ratify the divorce already granted by the Roman Curia, with the added permission to marry again. That done, nothing further remains to hinder the marriage. So you must manage to buy a house-lot or something of the sort in Toroczko."

"Have I money enough, do you think, to purchase an iron mine?"

"What, do you really propose to buy one?"

"Yes, — as my dowry to bring to Manasseh. He said he wished to begin a new career and turn miner."

"Very well, then, we'll buy a mine and call it by your name, and it can't fail to turn out a diamond mine."

The purchase was made on that very day, and in the evening the transfer of the property was solemnised with a banquet. It will be noted here that there is a great difference between the Hungarian Unitarians and the English Puritans. The strict observance of Sunday by the latter presents a marked contrast to the joy and freedom with which the day is celebrated by the former. The people of Toroczko gather in the evening for social intercourse, and even join in the pleasures of the dance, to the music of a gipsy orchestra, until the ringing of the vesper bell. Taverns and pot-houses are unknown in the village.

CHAPTER XIX.

A MIDNIGHT COUNCIL.

While blood was being shed on the banks of the Theiss, on the slopes of the Carpathians, and in the mountains of Transylvania, life at the Austrian capital went on much as usual. A grand ball given by the Marchioness Caldariva made its due claim on the attention of the fashionable world. After the last note of the orchestra had died away and the last guest had departed, Prince Cagliari led the fair hostess to her boudoir.

"How did it please you?" asked the prince, referring to the evening's entertainment.

"Not at all," replied the other, throwing her bracelets and fan down on the table. "Didn't you notice that not one member of the court circle was present? They all sent regrets."

"But the court is in mourning now, you know," was Cagliari's soothing reminder.

"And I am in mourning, too," returned Rozina, in a passion. "How long must I submit to this humiliation?" she demanded, compressing her lips and darting a wrathful look at her devoted slave.

"I swear to you," replied the latter, vehemently, "as soon as I get word of my divorced wife's death, our engagement shall be announced."

"And how long is that woman to live?" demanded the angry beauty, in a tone that startled the listener.

"As long as God wills," was all he could say in reply.

The fair Cyrene drew nearer and laid her cheek caressingly against his shoulder. "Do you know where your wife is now?" she asked softly, and when the other shook his head, she went on: "You see, I don't lose sight of her so easily. As for you, you could only shut her up in Rome and leave her there; but I knew how to go to work to rid ourselves of this obstruction. The dogs of Jezebel were howling under her very windows, when there came a man blundering on to the scene and spoiled everything, — a man who is a man, who is more than a prince, a man from top to toe, in short, who carried off the woman from Rome. I hoped they would take flight to some foreign land, whence we might have obtained an official announcement of her death. Of course it might not have been true, but the fugitives would have changed their names, in all probability, and an official certificate would have answered our purpose.

Did you receive Blanka's letter, — the one she wrote you from Trieste in November?"

"No," replied the prince, much astonished at what he had just heard; "and I recently sent to her, by Vajdar, her allowance of fifteen thousand scudi for the current quarter."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the marchioness, "a most affectionate and devoted foster-son you have there! Your letters pass through his hands and are, according to your directions, opened by him. As to this last letter of Blanka's, however, he must have forgotten to deliver it, and he counts himself blameless if a remittance of fifteen thousand scudi, directed to a person whose address cannot be found, goes astray. Really he has a genius for roguery. But you needn't get angry with him. The money has not gone out of the family: he spent it on diamonds for me. I learned all about that letter, too, a month ago."

"And may I inquire what the princess wrote me?"

"She begs leave to discontinue the enjoyment of your bounty, and announces her intention of marrying again; and to that end she declares her purpose of embracing the religion of her betrothed."

"The most pleasing result of which will be the saving to me of sixty thousand scudi a year, which I will henceforth bestow on you." The speaker laid a caressing hand on the woman's shoulder.

"Don't touch me, sir!" cried the marchioness, drawing back. "If one woman has had the spirit to say to you, 'There is your coronet and your gold; pick them up. I need them no longer, for I am going to marry a *man*, who shall be my lord and king,' — why, you may find that another woman can do the same."

"But what would you have me do?" asked the other, helplessly; "follow Blanka Zboroy's example and turn Protestant with you, so that we might marry each other?"

"Really, I have a good mind to say yes. What you propose in jest, sinful as it is, may be more to your liking than what I have to suggest."

"You have a plan, Rozina?"

"Yes. Before our loving couple can gain their end they must first reach Toroczko. There, high up in the mountains, lies the dove-cote where they hope to do their billing and cooing. But the surrounding woods are at present full of birds of prey, and —"

"Do you dare to think of such a thing?" interrupted the prince, with a start. The old *roué* had a dread of ghosts by night; he was full of all sorts of superstitions; he disliked to have a beautiful woman allude to certain unpleasant themes in his presence.

"I am only letting my fancy play a little," replied the marchioness, "but perhaps what I have in mind may come to pass. If not, then will be the time for action."

She fetched from her bookcase a military map of Transylvania. It gave in minute detail the mountains, hills, valleys, rivers, towns, and villages of the country.

"Here in this valley," she resumed, pointing with her finger, "lies Toroczko, and these positions that I have marked are held by the Wallachian insurgents. Have you heard about their doings?"

"Yes, frightful accounts."

"Well, then, what if our runaway couple should stumble upon the scene of some of these horrid deeds? Possibly your wife is even now lying in the bed of one of these mountain streams."

"Horrible!"

"Horrible only if it were really so and we had no proof of it. But I have guarded against that. The war office receives detailed reports of all that is going on in Transylvania, and a transcript of those reports is furnished me."

She produced a roll of manuscript and read a line or two, laughing as she did so. She might have been reading Sanskrit, for all the prince could understand of it. Then she nestled softly at her listener's side and began to stroke his chin with one velvet finger.

"If you wish to make me very happy — to make us both very happy," she murmured, "bring me from the war office the key to this mysterious manuscript. Then we will sit down and decipher it together; and if it contains the name I am so anxious to hear, you shall see how a lioness can kiss her tamer's feet."

The prince listened in silence. What effect her words were producing in his bosom, she could only conjecture. She threw herself back on her sofa with a smile on her face.

"What do you say?" she asked. "It is not yet too late to find some one at the war office to do your bidding. Indeed, the hour is well suited for a confidential mission of that sort. And when you come back, if you find me asleep, just whisper in my ear, 'News from Transylvania!'—and I will wake up at once. So good-bye for the present. I shall expect you back again soon."

Prince Cagliari took leave of the enchantress and made his way to the carriage that awaited him below. Entering it, he gave a direction to his coachman, and the carriage rolled rapidly down the street.

Soon after the fair Cyrene—or Rozina, to call her by her real name—found herself alone, the tall clock in her boudoir struck ten, although the hour was nearer two. She rose at once, and taking a little key from her bosom, unlocked and opened the door of the old-fashioned timepiece. But instead of hanging weights and a swinging pendulum, the opening revealed another open door beyond, through which stepped a young man, — Benjamin Vajdar.

"So you've come at last?" the marchioness exclaimed.

"Yes, and I have the key to the cipher despatches, too!"

All smiles and caresses, the siren led her visitor to the table on which lay the mysterious correspondence. But before the two begin their clandestine work, let us say a few words concerning the relations between them.

Months before, at a court ball to which Prince Cagliari's influence had procured the Marchioness Caldariva a much-coveted invitation, Benjamin Vajdar, who then occupied a subordinate government position, was also present. Struck with the beauty of the marchioness, he sought an introduction, and, to make a long story short, was soon enrolled among her willing slaves. Not long after this first meeting he threw up his modest position and became Prince Cagliari's private secretary. A day had already been set for his marriage with Anna Adorjan, but he had the hardihood to write and beg to be released from the engagement. He did not, however, think it necessary to announce in his letter that he had changed his religion and turned Roman Catholic.

A desire to shine in society, meanwhile, and the difficulty of doing so on a small salary, had led him to employ dishonest and criminal means for replenishing his purse. He had raised money on his friend Manasseh's forged signature. After entering the prince's service and finding himself amply supplied with means, he went to his broker to redeem the false note, but, to his consternation, was informed by the money-lender that, in a moment of financial embarrassment, although the note was not yet due he had presented it to Manasseh, who had promptly discounted it. Benjamin Vajdar felt capable of murdering the broker. A noose now seemed placed around his neck, and the end of the rope was held by the man whose sister he had just wronged so shamefully.

The new secretary's appearance in the prince's household served to hasten the impending outbreak between the recently married couple. One afternoon Blanka left the house and fled to a friend of hers in Hungary, whence her petition for a divorce soon led her, her friend, and her lawyer, as we have already seen, to Rome. The decree which was in due time issued from the Vatican, that, so long as his divorced wife lived, the prince might not marry again, was a serious check upon certain pet schemes cherished by the Marchioness Caldariva.

To return to the latter's boudoir, where she and her willing tool were bending over the cipher despatches, after long and fruitless search they came upon a name familiar to them both, — Adorjan. It appeared that a certain Adorjan of Toroczko had gone out to parley with the insurgent forces then besieging the town, and they had seized him and held him prisoner. A second Adorjan had followed to ransom his brother, but he too was detained. Finally there came a third brother, — Manasseh.

"Ah, at last!" cried the marchioness, eagerly.

It appeared that this third Adorjan was on his way home from Italy, and was accompanied by his fiancée, whom he left in care of his brother Aaron while he himself sought the insurgents' camp. He too was seized and imprisoned, and preparations were made for the execution of the three brothers; but in the morning, by some means or other, he succeeded in persuading his captors to release all three of their prisoners and to give the whole party, including the young lady, Princess Blanka Zboroy, a safe-conduct to Toroczko, while the insurgents themselves dispersed to their homes.

"But go on!" urged Rozina; "what occurred after that in Toroczko?"

"Nothing further is said about Toroczko," answered the other.

"Have you no spies there?" demanded the marchioness.

"No, there are no informers in Toroczko. There was one, but you have made him your slave."

"And you can sit there so calm and cool!" cried the woman, in a passion. "Just think, there is a man in that town in whose hand your good name and your freedom lie. If he but takes a fancy, he can drag you in the mud. You can count on no happiness, no security, without his consent. Remember, too, there is a woman with him who has smitten you in the face and made you recoil, who is perhaps even now laughing at you, who is the object of my deadly hatred, and during whose lifetime the door is closed to me into the world I wish to enter. So long as that woman lives the sun does not shine for me: I can show my face only at night. And can you sit there while those two are happy in each other's embraces? Oh, coward! How long are you going to let them live?"

Benjamin Vajdar did not venture to open his mouth. The marchioness drew a key from her bosom and held it before him. "Do you see that?" she whispered, while for an instant a smile lighted up her face. "This key belongs to the man who first brings me word of that woman's death." So saying, she kissed the little key and held it to the other's lips to kiss also. "What do you say?"

"I am wont only to think and to act, not to promise," was his reply.

"Very well. *Au revoir!*"

The marchioness pulled her bell-cord three times for her maid, — a signal for her visitor to retire. He hastened to the secret door, accordingly, and disappeared. Calling a cab, he ordered the driver to take him to the Café de l'Europe. The head waiter told him, in answer to his inquiries, that Prince Cagliari was there also, — was, in fact, taking supper with two ladies in a private room. The secretary asked to be shown thither.

"I knew you would turn up here before the night was over," cried the prince, with a laugh, as the young man entered. "I had a cover laid for you."

The two young women were costumed as *fleurs animées*, — the one as a violet, the other as a tulip. The remains of a generous meal were on the table. The newcomer held out his glass to the tulip and begged her to pour him some champagne.

"One moment!" interrupted the prince. "First let me ask a question. How much have you left of my wife's quarterly allowance that I sent her by you?"

"That is exactly what I was going to speak to you about," returned the young man. "I have to ask you for the next quarter's allowance also."

"Indeed! And must you have it immediately?"

"If you please."

"But haven't you already learned, from her letter which she wrote me in November, that she is about to change her religion and marry again, and that consequently she declines all further assistance from me? Didn't this letter come into your hands?"

Benjamin Vajdar shrugged his shoulders and calmly proceeded to squeeze lemon-juice on his oysters. "I assumed without question," he rejoined, "that a man of Prince Cagliari's chivalrous nature would merely reply to this letter: 'It is a matter of indifference to me how the princess orders her life; but so long as she bears my name she must not be forced to go on foot and soil her shoes.'"

"Bravo!" cried the prince. "And you would have me give her a dower for her second marriage, would you, and a quarter's allowance into the bargain?"

"Let us not discuss that at present," returned the other, "it would only spoil our evening. Time enough for serious matters to-morrow."

"But I wish to discuss it now."

"Very well. The truth of the matter is, the beautiful Princess Blanka is at this moment lying dead in the mountains of Transylvania."

The prince recoiled. "Young man, I forbid you to indulge in such ill-chosen jests."

Benjamin rose and made a low bow. "Such a lack of respect as a jest of that sort to my master and benefactor is an utter impossibility."

"Well, then, sit down, and let us have no play-acting. Where do you say this thing occurred?"

"Somewhere on the highway between Nagy-Enyed and Felvincz. She is lying there in the snow, transfixed with an insurgent's lance." The speaker therewith proceeded to relate several episodes in the bloody drama then enacting in Transylvania.

"But why are you so sure that the princess is one of the victims?" asked the listener.

"The names are all recorded," was the answer. "The first thing, therefore, for Prince Cagliari to do is to order the recovery of his wife's body, that it may receive proper interment in his family vault. If you wish to convince yourself of the truth of my statements, I will give you the key to the cipher despatches. The despatches themselves you will find in a place that is always open to you. Go and read for yourself."

"No, no," cried the prince, "I will not look at the papers. What you have said is enough for me."

"Very well," rejoined the secretary, quietly. "Then I will go and make ready to start at once for Transylvania. I am determined to find and bring back to you the remains of the Princess Blanka. It is a grim task, and calls for a heart of iron."

"And a purse of gold," added the other. "Here is my pocketbook to begin with, and I will open an account for you with a Czernovicz banker."

What was most important of all, the smooth-tongued secretary had entirely omitted, — namely, that the subject of his ingenious story was at that moment alive and well, and waiting to see the sun rise over the Toroczko hills.

After the prince had somewhat recovered from the effect produced upon him by Benjamin Vajdar's announcement, he gave himself up to the rapturous thought that now at last he could carry word to Rozina of his wife's death. He sought her presence without delay.

The marchioness, cosily ensconced on her sofa, was either asleep, or feigned to be, when Cagliari entered and whispered in her ear:

"Rozina, my wife is dead!"

Her eyes opened and a quick flush of pleasure overspread her face. "How? When? Where?" she asked eagerly.

"At Nagy-Enyed — killed by the insurgents."

"Nonsense!" cried the marchioness. "Who told you so?"

"My private secretary, your favourite, Benjamin Vajdar. He has just read it in the despatches received at the war office."

The listener's eyes flashed with scorn.

"I am telling you the truth," asserted the other, vehemently. "I give you my word of honour, it is as I say. I have this moment given Vajdar my purse and despatched him to Transylvania to bring the poor woman's body back to Vienna." The prince seated himself in an armchair opposite the marchioness, and continued: "I am even more eager than you to see her laid to rest in my family vault. My motives are deeper and stronger than yours. You have been longing for Blanka Zboroy's death because her existence meant humiliation to you. This thought has brought unrest to your pillow, but a legion of demons chases sleep from mine. Shall a Cagliari suffer any living woman to drag his name in the mire before all the world — to laugh to scorn the decree of the Roman Curia — to scratch out his name after her own and replace it with that of a Szekler peasant? That may be allowed to pass among common people, but the descendants of the Ferraras will find a way, or make one, to prevent such a scandal. It has become a necessity in my eyes that *she* should not walk the same planet with me."

The marchioness was listening by this time with wide eyes, flushed cheeks, and parted lips.

"Of late I have suffered heavy losses," the speaker continued. "Formerly my income amounted to a million and a half; now it is barely half a million. My estates in the Romagna have been confiscated, my serfs in Hungary freed, and I have lost frightful sums by my investments. I know many a poor devil has been forced to wont himself to rags and poverty, but for one who has been a leader among men to debase himself and drag out a miserable existence in obscurity — never! Shall I, forsooth, suspend the erection of the votive church which I began at the seat of my ancestors twelve years ago?

Or shall I, discarding the masterpieces of a Thorwaldsen, embellish the sacred edifice with the rude productions of a stone-cutter? Would you have me say to the woman I adore, 'My dear, hitherto we have lived in two palaces; henceforth we must be content with one'? But most impossible of all would it be to confess my pecuniary embarrassments to my banker and my major-domo, and to direct them to cut down my future expenditures by a third, to sell my picture-gallery, my museum, and two-thirds of my collection of diamonds. No, no! What I am now telling you has never passed my lips before, nor ever will again; for I know how to apply the remedy, and I will not submit to humiliation, even though it should cost human blood to prevent it."

The speaker bent forward and went on in a more guarded tone:

"Now as to the woman of whom we were speaking. When her brothers gave her to me in marriage, we entered into a contract which stipulated that the property of the one who died first should go to the survivor. She was young, I was old; the advantage was all on her side. Our divorce has not annulled this contract. If Blanka Zboroy dies, her brothers must deliver her property over to me."

"But her fortune is only a million."

"Don't you believe it. To be sure, her brothers paid her the interest on only a million, but her property really amounts to five times that sum. My part thus far has been simply to await the turn of events. In Rome, as it appears, this woman's fate hung by a thread; but all at once she took the insane notion of marrying again. However, that does not invalidate the contract between us, as the Roman Curia, though it granted her a divorce, did so on terms that will make it impossible to recognise her marriage with a Protestant. When death overtakes her, it will be as the Princess Cagliari that she leaves this world. One thing we must remember, however: the Protestant Church will require her to renounce her former faith in order to render her separation from her first husband valid. Yet, if she does this she will forfeit all claim to her property, which, by the testator's will, can descend only to Roman Catholic heirs."

With both hands Rozina drew the prince's head down and whispered in his ear: ,

"She must die before this second marriage takes place."

"I shall not meddle with destiny," returned the prince, straightening up again. "I shall be satisfied and ask no questions if Vajdar brings back a leaden casket containing the unhappy woman's remains. I shall render her the last honours with princely pomp, and shall then give orders to pursue and punish the insurgents who were responsible for her death."

Rozina burst out laughing. It is always too irresistibly funny to see the devil trying to wash himself clean. Even Cagliari himself was forced to smile.

"Yes," said he, "that is a joke we may laugh at, if you like. But now hear what I have to say further. If Blanka Zboroy renounces the faith of her fathers and marries again, it will not suffice for her only to die. The man she marries must die also, the parson who joined their hands at the altar, the witnesses of the ceremony, the whole family that received her in its midst, the schoolchildren that sang the bridal hymn, the guests who sat around the wedding-table, the people who looked out of their windows and saw the bridal procession pass, — yes, the whole town where this marriage took place must be destroyed, and I have it in my power to accomplish this. Now are you satisfied?"

CHAPTER XX.

MIRTH AND MOURNING.

Meanwhile preparations were going forward in Toroczko for the approaching nuptials. All preliminaries had been duly attended to, Blanka had joined the Unitarian Church, and nothing now stood in the way of her marriage to Manasseh.

In the courtyard to the rear of the Adorjan family mansion stood a little house, containing two rooms and a kitchen, which Aaron secretly fitted up in genuine Toroczko style, with carved hard-wood furniture, a row of pegs running around the wall and hung with a fine array of glazed earthenware mugs, and an old-fashioned dresser filled with pottery and a dazzling display of bright new tinware. In the sleeping-room bedclothes, canopy, and curtain were embroidered by peasant maidens. This little house was not to be shown to Blanka until her wedding day.

During these preparations Aaron climbed the Szekler Stone every evening and surveyed the horizon in search of any beacons blazing on the surrounding hills. "If only no mishap befalls, to spoil everything!" he would murmur to himself as he came down again.

On the Sunday when the banns are published for the last time it is customary for all the friends of the young couple — and there is sure to be a whole army of them — to assemble at the bridegroom's house, which in the present instance was also the bride's. The banquet on this occasion is not furnished by the bridal pair: it is a farewell supper given by the guests of the bride and groom, each of the company contributing a roasted fowl and a cake. The groom merely supplies the wine, but not gratis, as all pay for what they drink, and the sum thus collected goes into the village school fund.

On Monday morning the wedding festivities begin in earnest. At an early hour people are awakened by the firing of cannon, after which young men mount their horses and gallop hither and thither, and two others, accompanied by trumpeters, go forth to invite the village folk to the wedding and to bear the bridal gifts through the street. Then the nuptial procession moves, amid the glad ringing of bells, from the house of the bride to the church. The old men head the line, the young men come next, and the women follow, while the bridegroom with his escort, and the bride with her bridesmaids, are given a place in the middle of the procession. On coming out of the church, the newly married pair receive a shower of flowers from the hands of the maidens gathered at the door. But the ceremonies at the church by no means end the wedding festival. What follows is peculiarly characteristic and important. First the young men bearing the bridal cake run a race from the church to the bridegroom's house, the victor winning a silk neckerchief embroidered by the bride. Then comes the rhymed dialogue, in which the representatives of the bride and of the groom chaffer with each other over the bride, but always with the result that the bridegroom's deputy gets the better of his opponent — yet only after the bridegroom himself has promised to be father and brother to his young wife, and to cherish her as the apple of his eye. Thereupon the maidens form a ring around the bride, sing songs to her to conquer her bashfulness, and so induce her to yield her hand to the bridegroom. After this the bridesmaids escort her to her new home — which in this case was represented by the little house that Aaron had secretly furnished for her. Neither Blanka nor Manasseh had even suspected what he was about.

Blanka found herself in the paradise of her dreams, and when her attendants had placed a gold-embroidered cap on her head, and she came forth again into the courtyard, — which was now crowded with eager friends, — her hand in that of the man whose wife and queen she was thenceforth to be, it seemed to her that the happiness of heaven itself was her portion.

Five hundred guests partook of the wedding feast. Food and drink were provided in plenty, and every heart was filled to overflowing with the joy of the occasion. And yet, to Blanka herself, something was still lacking. "If Jonathan and Zenobia were only here!" she could not but say to herself, and her happiness was not quite complete without them.

Toward evening Aaron himself began to feel uneasy at their non-appearance. He had nearly exhausted his ingenuity in quieting Blanka's anxiety. Finally he played his last card.

"Now, my angel," said he, "you remember I promised you I would dance the Szekler dance at your wedding. Have the goodness to pay attention, and you will see something that is not to be seen every day."

The Szekler dance resembles no other terpsichorean exercise, nor is it by any means easy of execution. It calls for sinews of steel and great suppleness of limb. To make it still more difficult, the performer is obliged to provide his own music by singing a merry popular ballad while he dances. He throws himself first on one leg, then on the other, bending his knee and sinking nearly to the floor, while he extends the other leg straight before him, raises one hand above his head, and rests the other on his hip.

His heels must never touch the floor, nor may he, while bobbing thus comically up and down and trolling his lively ditty, suffer his face to relax from that expression of sober and dignified earnestness which marks the true Szekler. It is a dance and a display of great physical strength and endurance at the same time.

While Aaron's performance was still in progress, his brother Alexander broke through the circle of spectators and whispered something in his ear, whereupon the dancer immediately ceased his exhibition with the cry, "They have come!"

With an exclamation of joy Blanka sprang up from her seat. She wished to be the first to welcome the long-awaited pair.

"Sister-in-law," cried Alexander, "don't go out! Don't let her go out!"

But it was too late. Two horses stood before the door, and on one of them sat Zenobia. Blanka ran to her and took her hand.

"Have you come at last?" she exclaimed. "Oh, how long we've been looking for you! Let me help you down."

Zenobia, however, sat silent and made no move to dismount.

"Where is Jonathan?" asked Blanka.

"There he is." Zenobia pointed to the other horse, on whose back was bound a swathed form — a corpse.

"Jonathan!" cried Blanka, wildly.

"Your brother killed my father," Zenobia continued in a monotone, "and my brothers killed your brother; and so it will go on now for nobody knows how long."

Blanka was stricken speechless with horror, but Anna, who followed her, broke out in lamentations, until a strong hand was laid on her from behind and Aaron's voice was heard saying:

"Don't cry, don't make a noise! If the people inside hear you, they'll come out and tear Ciprianu's daughter to pieces; and she is now our guest."

Anna buried her face in Blanka's bosom.

"Alexander," said Aaron, softly, turning to his brother, "go in and tell the gipsy band to play a lively reel. The company must be kept amused."

Meanwhile Manasseh had appeared.

"Manasseh," whispered Aaron, "come and help me lift our brother down from the horse."

These words were to Manasseh like a dagger-thrust in his heart. His knees trembled under him. But presently he manned himself and hastened to untie the ropes that held the inanimate form on the horse's back.

Zenobia meanwhile went on talking in a low tone to Blanka. "In the skirmish at Felvincz, the Hungarians had one man killed, and he was the man. His horse carried him until I found him. You invited us to your wedding, and here we are. Now you may, if you wish, take me in and say to your guests, 'This is the daughter of that Ciprianu whose sons laid waste Sasd and Felvincz and killed Jonathan Adorjan.'"

"Away, away!" stammered Blanka, waving her hand. She was terrified at the thought of Zenobia's being found there by the people of Toroczko, and perhaps suffering violence at their hands.

"Go in peace," said Aaron. "My people will not pursue you. Let bygones be bygones between us. We owe each other nothing now."

"I owe you nothing, Aaron, but I owe something to your sister and your sister-in-law for the very kind invitation they sent me; and that is a debt which I will yet repay. To you, Manasseh, I have to say, remember those parting words on Monastery Heights: 'We make peace with you and swear to keep it; but if a traitor from your own number stirs up dissension between us, then tremble!' Think of those words often. And now farewell, and God bless you!"

With that she turned her horse about and rode away, breasting the wind, which blew the snow into her face.

"Where shall we lay the body?" asked Aaron. "The house is full of guests."

"Here, in our little cabin," said Blanka.

"What, in your bridal chamber?" gasped Aaron. "Oh, Father in heaven!"

But there was no other way. The two brothers bore Jonathan into the little house, unswathed his cold limbs, and laid him in the bridal bed until his coffin should be ready for him. So death entered the little abode and was the first guest.

Blanka sat down on the edge of the bed and gazed at the dead face. The resemblance between Jonathan and Manasseh was striking. This lifeless image of her husband suddenly revealed to her all that had hitherto been so carefully kept from her knowledge. When she met Jonathan in Kolozsvar she had conceived of the war, to which so many stately cavaliers were turning their horses' heads, as a kind of splendid tournament. She remembered now the promise she had made to give the young soldier a kiss on his return home, and recalled how he had begged her to keep her word even though he came back dead. And he had come back dead, and now claimed the fulfilment of her promise. She bent down over him, and as she did so the illusion that it was Manasseh himself lying lifeless before her, grew stronger still. She trembled as she touched her lips to the dead man's marble brow, and with an outburst of sobs and tears she called aloud, "Manasseh!"

He was at her side in a moment, bending over her and pressing her to his heart. So he was not dead, after all. She recovered her self-control, but she murmured in his ear:

"Oh, do not die! Never let me see you lying like that before me!"

Then she gave place to the three brothers, who likewise embraced the dead man. One by one the other brothers came out of the house of rejoicing and entered the chamber of mourning. Alexander had summoned them. The guests, however, found nothing strange in their disappearance, but merely gave themselves up the more unrestrainedly to the gaiety of the occasion. That the bride and groom should have vanished so suddenly was entirely in accord with established usage: the loving pair had, it was taken for granted, sought the spot where all the delights of paradise awaited them. How different was the reality from these conjectures!

Blanka watched through the long hours by the dead man's couch. So passed her wedding night.

At early dawn the tolling of bells announced to the people of Toroczko that death had laid his cold hand on one of their number. Those who had been wedding guests the day before now came as mourners to the house of the Adorjans.

The brothers were out on the mountainside. Graves for the dead in Toroczko are hewn out of the solid rock, and the side of some bare cliff serves the people for a cemetery. Here each family has a vault, which, as years pass, penetrates more and more deeply into the mountainside, until in many cases it becomes a veritable tunnel. No name is carved over these vaults, and only the memory of the survivors serves to distinguish one tomb from another. When a man dies, his relatives take it on themselves to hollow out his grave in the cliff. This is an old and pious custom. If, however, there is no man in the family to render this last service, the neighbours gladly offer their help. It would be a grievous thing in Toroczko to have one's grave dug by a hired grave-digger.

In the afternoon the catafalque was erected in the church, and the entire population assembled to pay the last honours to the deceased. The people sang, and the pastor delivered a funeral discourse. Then all accompanied the remains to the rock-hewn cemetery. Men bore the coffin on their shoulders, and on the coffin lay the dead man's sword, crowned with garlands, and his shako pierced with a bullet-hole. Leading the procession marched a student chorus singing a dirge, while weeping women brought up the rear. When the family vault was reached, the seven brothers of the deceased took the coffin and laid it in the niche prepared to receive it; then they rolled a great stone before the opening, came out of the vault, and kissed one another.

After that a plain villager, an old and gray-haired man, mounted a stone pulpit and addressed the assembly, telling them who it was they were burying, how he had lived, how he had been loved, and in what manner he had come to his end. The speaker closed with the hope that the memory of the departed might last as long as there were dwellers in the valley to speak his name. The pastor then blessed the grave and pronounced a benediction on the company before him. Finally the student choir rendered a closing selection, while the women and children left the place in groups, and only the men remained behind.

Aaron now ascended the stone pulpit and spoke. "Brothers and friends," he began, "we have done our duty to the dead; now let us discharge our obligations to the living. Enough of funeral dirges for the present! Let us now to arms!"

Three hundred men echoed his words. "To arms!" they cried, "to arms!" They were ready and eager to go in quest of the foemen at whose hands their fellow-townsman had met his death. "Come, let us go home and arm ourselves!" said they, one to another.

"We will meet in the marketplace!" called out Aaron from the stone pulpit, when suddenly he felt a strong hand on his belt behind, and he was lifted down bodily from his place. He did not need to ask who dealt thus summarily with him; he knew that only his brother Manasseh was capable of such a feat of strength.

"What are you thinking of?" cried Manasseh, in a voice that all could hear. "Have I not made peace with our neighbours and sworn in the name of the one living God to maintain it, and would you put me to shame?"

"Have they not murdered our brother Jonathan?" demanded Aaron.

"No; our brother fell in battle like a brave soldier, with his sword in his hand. And others of our land are fighting now for their country and will die for her. We shall mourn them and honour their memory, but we are not wild Indians to exact a bloody vengeance for those fallen on the battle-field."

"Very well, brother Manasseh, but you need not charge us with being wild Indians. I do not ask that we should fall upon our neighbours and burn their houses over their heads, but that we should be on our guard and defend ourselves and our families the best we know how. Believe me, brother, I am as good a Christian as the next man; I go to church every holy day, even when I am ill; but I feel easier, when I pray for my soul's salvation, if I know my gun is loaded and primed."

"Then you are no true believer in God," returned Manasseh, in a tone of reproof. "You worship that

Jesus in whose name the massacre of St. Bartholomew was perpetrated, the burning of heretics sanctioned, and the crusades undertaken; but you are no true follower of that Jesus who came with a message of peace and good-will to mankind, and who said to Peter, 'They that take the sword shall perish with the sword.'"

"I am not so sure that he really said that," rejoined Aaron, shrewdly. "Matthew has it that he did, but Mark and Luke make no mention of it, and, according to John, Jesus simply said to Peter, after the latter had cut off the ear of Malchus, the high priest's servant, 'Put up thy sword into the sheath.' At any rate, I am not clear what I should have done had he said it to me; but I know one thing, if I had been there when the Saviour handed the sop to Judas, I should have dealt Iscariot such a blow on the head that he wouldn't have had wit enough left to betray his master. And just so I will strike down the traitor who leads a foe against Toroczko, if he once comes within my reach."

"What traitor do you mean?"

"The one that the girl spoke of yesterday when she said, 'If a traitor rises up from amidst your own people, then tremble!' I know whom she meant now: with the insurgents is a man, lately come into notice, who surpasses all his fellows in cruelty. He is our Iscariot."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because he calls himself Diurbanu. No genuine Wallachian would have taken the nickname of his king, Decebalus. It is as if one of us should call himself Attila. Now, then, Manasseh, I love you and am ready to follow your lead. I shall never forget how you went up to Monastery Heights and came back with our two brothers. You knew how to serve them better than I. I would have avenged their death merely, but you saved their lives. So, as you made peace with Moga and his people, you have a right to ask us to keep it. Therefore we will demand no atonement from them for Jonathan's death. But when we hear that Diurbanu and his men, who know nothing about that peace and are no parties to it, are advancing on Toroczko, then will be the time for us to act."

"And I will take a hand with you," declared Manasseh.

Therewith the two brothers clasped hands and embraced each other, after which the men all returned to their homes.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SPY.

Albeit the earth reeked with blood in those days, yet the spring of 1849 saw the flowers blooming in as great profusion as ever, as if God's blessing had been vying with man's curse to see which should outdo the other.

On a beautiful afternoon in May, Blanka and Anna, with Manasseh and Aaron, were climbing a steep and tortuous mountain path. Manasseh had his portfolio and some few other implements of his craft, while Aaron carried the ladies' wraps and lunch-basket. With the exception of iron-shod alpenstocks, none of the party were armed. The two men walked on ahead, side by side, leaving the young women to loiter behind and pick mayflowers. Rhododendrons, orchids, and epigonitis rewarded their search in abundance. From the valley below came up the bleating of goats and the flute-like notes of the blackbird.

"Are you really in earnest, Aaron, about defending the town from this position in case of an attack?" asked Manasseh.

"Wasn't it from the Szekler Stone that our fathers repulsed the whole Mongolian horde?" was the rejoinder.

"But that was in the old days, in old-fashioned warfare."

"Well, the Wallachians are now no further advanced in military science than were the Tartars then."

"Yes, but at that time the Szekler Stone was in a condition for defence," objected Manasseh.

"And how do you know I haven't put it in such a condition again?" asked the other.

"I should like to see how you have accomplished it."

"I shall not show you, for you are not a soldier, and no civilian shall see my fortifications. I will show them to the two young ladies; they count as combatants. The other day they coaxed Alexander to lend them his pistols, and since then they have been practising shooting at a mark in the garden behind the house."

"What, does my wife know how to handle a pistol?"

"To be sure; and it's no elderberry popgun, either. You may depend upon it, she'll sell her life dear. You needn't laugh."

The rocky height known as the Szekler Stone commands a view of vast extent. Nestled among the hills, twenty-two villages may be counted from its summit, with the Aranyos River winding this way and that among them, like a ribbon of silver, until it empties into another tortuous stream which carries its waters to the Maros. But on the opposite side, toward the northwest, in striking contrast with this picture of happy human industry, a boundless waste of rugged, forest-clad mountain peaks meets the eye, with no sign of house or hamlet.

From the side toward Toroczko, which lay smiling in the valley, its fruit-trees in full bloom, its fields looking like so many squares of green carpet, and its church-spire rising conspicuous above the foliage, one could hear, like the throbbing of a giant's heart, the heavy beating of steam hammers. There the scythe and the ploughshare were being fashioned, and all the implements wherewith the hand of man subdued to his use those rugged hillsides.

"If I could only paint that picture!" sighed Manasseh.

"You succeeded with the Colosseum," was Blanka's encouraging rejoinder.

"That was Rome, this is Toroczko. I could hit my sweetheart's likeness; my mother's is beyond me."

Nevertheless he was determined to try his hand; so the others left him at work and went on to view the curiosities of the Szekler Stone.

"Take good care of my wife," Manasseh called to his brother, "and don't let her fall over any precipice."

"Never fear," Aaron shouted back. "The whole Szekler Stone shall fall first."

"Promise not to take Blanka and Anna up Hidas Peak."

"I promise."

"On your honour as a Szekler and a Unitarian?"

"On my honour as a Szekler and a Unitarian."

With that Manasseh let them go their way. But in the midst of his sketching it occurred to him that Aaron had only promised not to "take" the ladies up Hidas Peak, which might mean that he would not carry them up, but was at liberty to lead them; for Aaron was full of all such quips and quibbles as that. Manasseh closed his portfolio, picked up his things, and followed the path taken by the others.

Yet there was no mischievous intent in Aaron's mind. He conducted Anna and Blanka to the verge of the gorge that separates the so-called Hidas Peak of the Szekler Stone from the Louis Peak. This ravine is a deep cutting, down which a steep, breakneck path leads directly to Toroczko, but is very seldom used. On the farther side of the gorge may be seen a cave in the rocks, popularly known as Csegez Cave. A rude stone rampart guards its mouth, and, as only a very narrow path along the brink of the precipice leads to this cavern, it could be easily held against an assault.

On the summit of Hidas Peak was planted a bundle of straw, which was visible from a considerable distance, and served as a warning not to ascend. Was it meant as a protection to the single fir-tree left standing there in lonely majesty, or to deter hay-thieves from cutting the grass that grew there? Perhaps it was a friendly caution to sightseers not to hazard the ascent, as it might cost them their lives.

The two young women recognised at once the inadvisability of their attempting this dangerous climb, but to Aaron the ascent was mere sport. He had often been up there before. Promising his companions that, if they would be on their good behaviour, and not stir from the spot, he would climb the rocky height, blow a blast on his horn that should awake the echoes, and bring them back a twig from the solitary fir-tree, he left them seated on the grass and busy arranging the flowers they had gathered.

It seemed a long time before he gained the summit, and the young women grew tired of sitting still in one place. Anna, true miner's daughter that she was, spied some scattered bits of carnelian in the rubble near by, and pointed them out to Blanka. Agate and chalcedony were also to be found among the loose stones, and often the three occurred together. Both Anna and her companion were soon busy gathering these treasures and pocketing the rarest specimens. Indeed, so intent were they on their work that they failed to note the approach of a strange man, until he stood within fifty paces of them. Whence could he have come? Had he been concealed behind some rock? What was his purpose in thus stealing on the two unprotected women? He wore the Wallachian peasant costume, — a high cap of white lamb's wool, from beneath which his long, black hair hung down over his shoulders, a leather dolman, without sleeves, a broad belt with buckles, under which his shirt extended half-way to his knees, and laced shoes. He carried a scythe over one shoulder, and stood with his back to the sun, so that his features could not be clearly distinguished.

The young women seized each other by the hand, and uttered a cry of alarm. The sight of the strange figure seemed to work on them like a nightmare, or like the ghost of some one known in life, but long since laid to rest in the grave. At first the man appeared to be as badly frightened as the young ladies. He halted, gave a start as of surprise, opened his mouth to speak, and then stood dumb, with staring eyes. For several seconds he seemed undecided what to do next. Then he put himself in motion and advanced toward the ladies, his face at the same time assuming a wild, demoniac expression. He lowered his scythe from his shoulder, and grasped it in his right hand.

At that moment there sounded from the height above the trumpet-like peal of Aaron's horn.

"Aaron! Aaron!" cried both young women in concert and with all their strength.

The intruder, taking fright at sound of the horn and at the name, stood still and threw a look behind.

"Run, *frate!*"[1] shouted Aaron from above, already descrying the man.

But the latter, counting with safety on a considerable interval before Aaron could descend, started once more toward Anna and Blanka. Only twenty paces now intervened between him and them. His eyes glowed and his face was distorted with a horrid expression, more brutal than human. His appearance might well have made the boldest recoil. Anna planted herself before her companion, as if to shelter her, while Blanka felt only a mad desire to run and throw herself over the precipice. But suddenly, when the man was only a few steps from them, he halted and drew back as if some one had smitten him in the face, his knees trembled, and an inarticulate cry escaped his lips. He seemed to have encountered something from which he drew back in dismay, as the leopard, when pursuing a deer, turns tail at sight of a lion. Blanka and Anna gave a backward glance and then started to run. Fear now left them, and as they ran they called aloud, in the glad assurance of help near at hand, "Manasseh! Manasseh!" — until they reached him and threw themselves into his arms.

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[1] Rumanian for "brother."

Meanwhile the strange man, looking over his shoulder and seeing Aaron descending upon him with bold leaps and bounds, did not pause long to consider, but dropped his scythe and ran for his life, down the steep side of the gorge, over rubble-stones and slippery boulders.

"What are you so frightened at?" asked Manasseh, taking the matter lightly and kissing back the roses into the ladies' pale cheeks.

Panting and gasping for breath, they could hardly stammer out the cause of their alarm, but managed to explain that a "terrible man" had suddenly come upon them and chased them. Yet neither Blanka nor Anna went on to say of whom this strange figure had reminded her.

"You little geese!" cried Manasseh, laughing, "it was only a hay-thief. Grass grows on Hidas Peak, and ever since the days of King Matthias the Szeklers on the Aranyos have quarrelled with their neighbours over the cutting of it. The man who is on hand first with his scythe carries it off. So that bugaboo of yours was merely a harmless peasant in quest of fodder for his cow, and he took fright at sight of us and ran away. Look there, will you, he has dropped his scythe in his eagerness to escape."

The two young women, still clinging to Manasseh, went with him to examine the Wallachian's scythe.

"A tool of our own make!" he cried, lifting it up and inspecting it. "It has our trade-mark. The snath is full of notches — probably the owner's record of work done and of his share in the harvest."

The said owner was by this time far down the steep path. Aaron now joined his companions, much out of breath, red in the face, and without his hat, which he had thrown away in order to run the faster. He shouted to the fugitive to stop, and, going to the edge of the ravine, snatched up a great stone and hurled it after him.

"Oh, heavens!" cried Anna, "what have you done? What if it should hit him?"

"If it hits him it will help him along the faster," was Aaron's reply as he caught up a second stone, smaller than the first, and sent it to overtake its fellow. But the fleeing form was too far down the hill to serve as a good target, and Aaron's stones bounded harmlessly by.

"You might have killed him!" said Anna, reproachfully.

"And that would have been the best thing for all concerned," answered Aaron, giving his moustache a fierce pull.

"But it would have been a piece of needless cruelty," remarked Manasseh, — "and merely on account of a little hay that has not been touched, after all."

"He didn't come up here to steal hay; he is one of Diurbanu's spies."

"But what, pray, could he spy out here?"

"What could he spy out? Oh, just see how sharp my brother Manasseh is! My fortifications and armament are on the Szekler Stone. Yes, you may laugh now, but you won't laugh when you come to learn their value. I will show the ladies my cannon, but I won't let you see them, Manasseh."

"Cannon, brother?" repeated Manasseh, laughing. "How in the world did you ever get them up here?"

"My business is with the ladies now," was all Aaron would say. "You sit down on a stone and paint the beautiful view. My battery is not for you to see. Yes, I have a battery, all complete. If Aaron Gabor could fit out his Szeklers with artillery, why should not his namesake be able to do the same? You young women may see my big guns; I'll show them to you. But first promise me solemnly not to tell any mortal soul what you see — not even Manasseh."

Blanka and Anna both pledged themselves most solemnly to secrecy, whereupon Aaron led them up to a height on which stood the ruins of Szekler-Stone

Castle, one of the oldest monuments to be found in all Hungary.

After a short interval the three rejoined Manasseh, the two ladies laughing and in the merriest of moods, scarcely heeding their conductor's solemnly raised forefinger and sober mien, which were meant to remind them of their promise. But they betrayed no secrets; they only laughed. Yet Aaron thought it betrayal enough for them even to laugh.

"That's always the way," he muttered, "when you let a woman into a secret!"

They soothed and caressed him, but only laughed the more as they did so.

"I wish you to understand that this is no trifling matter," he declared, "and that I had good reason to send those stones after that prying spy."

This allusion checked the young women's merriment at once, and a shudder ran over them at the remembrance of what had passed. "Did we both have the same thought?" whispered Blanka to Anna.

"Yes," returned the latter, with a sigh.

That night, before she lay down to sleep, Anna veiled the little portrait that hung in her room, as if to prevent her seeing it in her dreams.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE HAND OF FATE.

THROUGH the main street of Abrudbanya rode two men, one of them wearing an overcoat with silver buttons over his Wallachian dress, and a tuft of heron's feathers in his cap, while at his side hung a curved sword, pistols protruded from his holsters, and a rifle lay across his saddle-bow. His face had nothing of the Wallachian peasant in its features or expression. The other horseman, however, who rode at some paces' distance in the rear, was manifestly of the peasant class.

The horses' hoofs awoke the echoes of the vacant street. Silence and desolation reigned supreme. Half-burned houses and smoke-blackened walls greeted the riders on every side. High up on the door-post of a church appeared the bloody imprint of a child's hand. How had it come there? Grass and weeds were growing in the market-place, and a millstone covered the village well. Here and there a lean and hungry dog crept forth at the horsemen's approach, howled dismally, and then retreated among the ruins.

After this scene of devastation was passed, the highway led the riders along the bank of a stream, on both sides of which smelting works had been erected, as this region is rich in gold-producing ore; but nothing except charred ruins was now left of the buildings. At intervals a deserted mill was passed, its wheel still turning idly under the impulse of the tireless stream. Leaving this mining district behind, the two riders came to a settlement of a different sort, which had not been given over entirely to destruction. Only occasionally a house showed windows or doors lacking, while many were wholly unharmed. Among the latter was one building in whose front wall a well-preserved Roman gravestone was set, its carving in high relief being still clearly outlined. Here had once been entombed the ashes of Caius Longinus, a centurion of the third legion. *Sit sibi terra levis!* One of the door-posts had in ancient times served as a milestone, and the broad bench before the house was made from the lid of a sarcophagus, bearing an inscription which informed the archæologist what saffron-haired Roman beauty had, centuries before, been laid to rest beneath it.

The riders drew rein before this house, and straightway an old woman of extraordinary ugliness stuck her head out of the little door. Among the Wallachians one meets with the comeliest young women and the ugliest old hags. Knock at any door, and it is sure to be opened by one of these ancient dames.

"He isn't at home," called out the old woman, without waiting to be addressed. "He has gone to the 'Priest's Tree.' You'll find him there."

"Well, then, if you know where this 'Priest's Tree' is, go ahead and show us the way," commanded he of the silver buttons, unwilling even to halt long enough to water his horse, so pressing was his errand.

The way led through a vast forest, and when the riders reached their destination it was late evening, the darkness being further increased by gathering thunder-clouds. The so-called "Priest's Tree" is a giant beech standing in a broad open space and fenced around with a hedge planted by pious hands. Under this tree have been sworn the most solemn of oaths, and the ground shaded by it is hallowed. Near by stands a wooden church, exactly like the churches to be seen in all Wallachian villages, its steep roof and sides covered with shingles, and a pointed turret surmounting the whole. The belfry has no bell, and the windows are unglazed, so that the breezes blow at will through the deserted building.

Our riders found a dozen or more horses tethered at the foot of the tree and watched by a few Wallachian lads, who were muffled in fur coats against the approach of the storm. The beech furnished a good shelter: lightning could not strike it, as it was the "Priest's Tree."

Leaving his horse in charge of his attendant, he of the silver buttons hastened on to the church door, where an armed sentry demanded his name.

"Diurbanu," was the reply, whereupon he was admitted.

The interior of the church was very dark. Two wax tapers, indeed, burned on the altar, but they flickered and flared so in the wind as to furnish a very insufficient light. The thunder-clouds without, however, were now rent with frequent flashes of lightning, which served to illumine the scene within. About a dozen men were assembled there, sitting on the benches that had once been occupied by worshippers, some wearing the costume of the country, while others were dressed in military uniform. Before them, with his back to the altar, sat a man of commanding appearance, attired in a clerical gown with long, flowing sleeves. In his lap he held a little fair-haired boy, covering the child with one of his wide sleeves, and giving it the golden crucifix that hung from his neck to play with. At times his long black beard completely concealed the child's face. The little one was playing and prattling, giving no heed to the talk of the men about him and betraying no alarm at the tumultuous approach of the storm.

The newcomer advanced and addressed the group:

"Gentleman and friends, glorious descendants of Decebalus and Trajan!"

"Never mind ceremony now, Diurbanu," interrupted the wearer of the gown, in a deep, commanding voice. "What news? Let us hear your errand."

"I am the bearer of instructions."

"Out with them, then!"

"We must prosecute the war with might and main. There is no time to lose. Bem regards the Transylvanian campaign as ended, and has set out with his whole army for the Banat, leaving only a few regulars to guard the passes and to prosecute the siege of Karlsburg. Our part is to check him in his march on Croatia."

"Or, in other words," interrupted the man in the gown, "to prevent him from dealing Jellachich a fatal blow, we are to throw ourselves in Bem's way."

"The victors of Abrudbanya and Brad will not shrink from the undertaking, I should hope," was Diurbanu's response.

"Let us understand each other," said the other, setting the little boy on his knee and trotting him up and down as he spoke. "Is it reasonable to suppose that we could, without cavalry, artillery, or experienced commanders, attack a fully equipped force with any hope of success, especially after that force has driven an Austrian army corps out of the country and shown itself able to repulse the Russian auxiliaries?"

"No one expects that of us. Our operations are to be confined to raids in the mountains."

"But no enemy is to be found now in the mountains. Don't you know that? You have just come over the mountains. Did you see any sign of the enemy?"

"We have foes enough there still. There is Toroczko." Diurbanu's face, as he said this, was suddenly illumined by a blinding flash of lightning.

"And Torda!" cried a voice from the benches.

"No, we have nothing against Torda," declared Diurbanu, almost angrily.

"But what have we against Toroczko?" asked another voice. "The men of Toroczko have never done us any harm. So far we have received their iron only in the form of ploughs and shovels, scythes and wheel-tires."

"Their sons are serving under Bem," was the rejoinder, "and it is from them that we have received their iron in other shapes. Yet that is not the main reason. Toroczko is a breeding-place of Magyar ideas and Magyar civilisation, an asylum open to Protestant reformers, the pride of a handful of people who hope to conquer the world by dint of their science and industry. The fall of Toroczko would spread a wholesome fear far and wide; it would be almost as if one should report the overthrow of Pest itself. Bem's men would halt on the march, panic-stricken at the news, and Bem himself would be forced to yield to their desires and return to Transylvania. And the more terrible our work of devastation, the more brilliant will be the military success that must follow as its result."

The thunder-claps came at such frequent intervals that the speaker could with difficulty make himself heard. When he had ended, the deep voice of him who wore the clerical gown began in reply:

"Listen to me, Diurbanu. You are deceived on one point. Those on whom you count in this bloody work are sated with slaughter. So long as they thirsted for revenge they were eager to shed human blood; but now they have slaked their thirst and are beginning to rue their deeds. I saw a family being cut down in the open street, and I rushed forward and snatched this little flaxen-haired boy from the murderers' hands and hid him under my cloak. At that a young man, the most furious one of the party, aimed such a stroke at my head with his scythe that he would certainly have split my skull had not my cap deadened the blow. But three days later this same young man came to see the child whose rescue had filled him with such fury that he had lifted his hand with murderous intent against me, his anointed priest; and because the little boy cried for his lost blackbird, the young man went into the woods and caught another for him. More than that, he would now gladly restore the boy's parents to him if he could. Ever since I saved the little one's life he has clung to me and refused to be parted from me."

The priest spoke in a tongue strange to the little boy, who consequently understood not a word of what was said, but went on with his innocent prattle and laughter.

"Comrades," resumed Diurbanu, addressing the group before him, "all this is wide of the mark. We are in the midst of war, and in war-times the soldier must go whither he is sent."

"Very well, Diurbanu," was the reply, "our soldiers will go whither they are sent. The wind can direct the storm-cloud whither it shall go, but cannot compel it to flash lightning and hurl thunderbolts at command."

"But I know one storm-cloud," rejoined Diurbanu, "that has not withheld its thunderbolts."

"You mean Ciprianu and his men?"

"Yes."

"But Ciprianu and both his sons are now fallen."

"So much the better. He left a daughter who thirsts for revenge."

"Do you know her?"

"She is my sweetheart."

"And have you picked out the village whose destruction is to be her bridal gift? Which one is it?"

"I have told you already, — Toroczko."

"But I say it shall be Torda!" cried a determined voice.

"I protest."

"Let us draw lots to decide it."

"Very well," assented Diurbanu, and, going to the altar on which stood the flickering candles, he wrote a name on each of two cards and threw the bits of pasteboard into his cap. "Now who will draw?" he asked; but no one volunteered. "It must be an innocent hand that decides the fate of these two towns," continued Diurbanu. "This little chap shall draw for us."

"What, this innocent child decide which town shall be given over to fire and blood and pillage!" exclaimed the priest. "An infernal contrivance of yours, Diurbanu!"

But meantime the child had reached out a tiny hand and clutched at one of the cards, which it handed to the priest.

"Bring me one of the candles," bade the latter.

But no candle was necessary, for even as he spoke a flash of lightning penetrated to the remotest corner of the little church. The group of men whose heads were bent over the bit of cardboard started and cried out in concert:

"Toroczko!"

In the peal of thunder that followed the very ground shook under their feet and the building rocked over their heads.

CHAPTER XXIII.

OLD SCORES.

THE inhabitants of the doomed town were warned beforehand by a friendly informer what was in store for them. For two months they knew that they were standing over a mine which awaited only the proper moment to be touched off. Nevertheless, during this time they went about their usual tasks, digging iron out of the bowels of the earth, sowing their grain, planting and weeding their gardens, spinning their flax, tanning their hides, sending their children to school, and all betaking themselves to church on Sunday morning. The Sunday afternoon diversions, however, were suspended, and in their stead the entire male population practised military drill. Even the twelve-year-old boy cried if he was not allowed to take part. All were determined to shed their last drop of blood rather than let the enemy set foot inside their town. Even the women busied themselves sharpening axes and scythes, resolute in their purpose to defend their little ones or, if need were, to put them to death with their own hands and then slay themselves. No woman, no child, should fall into the enemy's clutches alive.

It was the very last day of July. The fields were dotted with sheaves of grain, and the farmers were hastening to gather them in. They had been surprised by countless numbers of crows and ravens which invaded the valley and filled the air with their hoarse, discordant cries. Those experienced in war knew that these birds were the usual attendants and heralds of armies.

More definite tidings were not long in coming. Messengers from St. George arrived breathless with the report that Diurbanu's troops were rapidly approaching. But no one was disconcerted by the news; all were ready for the enemy. Throwing scythes and pitchforks aside, they snatched up their firearms. Each battalion of the national guard had its assigned position. The streets were barricaded with wagons, and the road toward Borev was laid under water by damming the brook, to prevent a surprise from that direction. Aaron, with forty other men, clambered up the steep slope of the Szekler Stone to repulse the enemy from this commanding height, — forty men against as many hundred. They would have laughed at their own folly had they but stopped to think.

Toward noon the sturdy little band of defenders was increased by the coming of fugitives from St.

George. For these, too, there were arms enough in Toroczko. The effective force now in the village amounted to nearly four hundred.

Manasseh was at home with the women of the family. They had declined Aaron's offer to conceal them in Csegez Cave, preferring to remain under the family roof and there await what God had appointed them. Manasseh now embraced Blanka and Anna and bade them farewell.

"Where are you going?" asked Blanka, in alarm. Jonathan's pale face seemed at that moment to float before her vision, and she feared to part with her husband, lest he should not return.

"I am going to the enemy's camp."

"Alone?"

"No, not alone. I am well attended: Uriel goes before me, Raphael is on my right hand, Gabriel on my left, behind me Michael, and over my head Israel."

"But you are going unarmed."

"No, I am armed with the peace treaty which our foes concluded with me, swearing not to attack Toroczko. That is my weapon, and with it I will win a bloodless victory."

Blanka looked sorrowfully into her husband's face, and in that look was expressed all that her tongue was powerless to utter, — her infinite love for the man and her deep despair at the thought of perhaps never again meeting those eyes so full of love and tenderness for her.

"I tried it once before, you know," he reminded her, "and you know how well I succeeded then. The leader of the Wallachians is an old acquaintance of mine." But this last was true in a sense that the speaker little dreamed — as he was to learn later.

Blanka pressed her husband's hand. "Very well," said she, with a brave effort at cheerful confidence, "do as seems best to you, and Heaven will care for us."

Manasseh could not suppress a sigh as he kissed his wife on the forehead. Anna, who could read her brother's face, knew what that sigh meant.

"You need not be anxious about us, dear brother," she said. "We are under God's protection, and are prepared for the worst. We decided long ago what we should do if we were forced to it. When all is lost that is dearest to us, — our loved ones, our home, our country, — we shall not wait tamely for the enemy to break into the house. Here are two pistols: each of us will take one of them and point it at the other's heart, each will utter the name that is last in her thoughts, and that will be the last word that will ever pass her lips. Now you may go on your errand and need not fear for us."

Manasseh's feelings were too deep for utterance. Without a word he kissed the dear ones before him and then left the house and hastened away. He turned his face toward St. George. He was alone and had not even a stick in his hand.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. To a good pedestrian St. George is only half an hour's walk from Toroczko. On the outskirts of the village Manasseh met scattered bodies of soldiery who surveyed him in much surprise; but, as he was unarmed, they offered him no injury. His calmness of bearing and the cool, collected look with which he met their scrutiny completely disarmed them. Besides, they were busy cutting up slaughtered cattle and cooking their supper in the open fields. As was usual among such irregular troops, no outposts had been set to challenge the approach of strangers.

Manasseh accosted the first man whose face impressed him favourably, and asked for guidance to the commander's quarters. The man willingly gave him his escort. On the way he went so far as to unbosom himself to Manasseh, complaining that, at this busy season of the year, when all ought to be at home, men were forced to make so long a march. After showing the way to the house where the commander was to be found, he received a cigar from Manasseh, and acknowledged himself amply repaid for his trouble.

Manasseh advanced to the door and announced to a group of armed men lounging about it that he wished to see Diurbanu.

"The general is not to be seen just now," was the reply; "he is at dinner, and will not leave the table for some time yet."

Manasseh drew a visiting-card from his pocket, and, first bending down one corner, sent it in to the general. The bearer of it soon returned with the announcement that Diurbanu bade the visitor wait awhile, and meantime he was to be bound and confined in the cellar. Manasseh assented to this peculiar reception. "Many men, many manners," said he to himself. It would have been easy enough for him to leap the railing of the porch and flee to the woods before the others could lay hands on him, but he had not come hither merely to run away again the next moment.

"Very well, go ahead and bind me," said he, good-humouredly, to the guards. But they looked at one another in helpless inquiry who should undertake to manacle this large, strong man. When at length two had volunteered to essay the task, it appeared that there was no rope in readiness. "Go and get one," commanded the prisoner; and when a stout cord had been procured, he went on with his directions: "Now take my pocketbook out; you'll find some loose change in it which you may divide among you. There is also a folded paper in the pocketbook; deliver it to the general and ask him to read it. Then take a cigar out of my waistcoat pocket, light it and stick it in my mouth."

These commands having been duly executed, two of the guards led their prisoner down into the cellar, which appeared to be Diurbanu's antechamber for such visitors as came to him with troublesome petitions. Not satisfied with conducting him to the main or outer cellar, Manasseh's escort opened the iron door leading into an inner compartment, pushed him through it, and closed the portal upon him, after bidding him take a seat and make himself comfortable.

Manasseh found himself in almost total darkness. Only an air-hole over his door admitted a very feeble light from the dimly illumined outer cellar. He began to consider his situation, comforting himself with the reflection that at Monastery Heights he had been treated in much the same fashion, except that there his hands had not been bound. He had been kept in confinement all night, and in the morning his terms of peace had been accepted. This time, too, he hoped for a like issue.

When a cigar is smoked in the dark it lights up the smoker's face at each puff. Suddenly a voice from out of the gloom called, "Manasseh!"

"Who is there?"

"I."

It was a gipsy, whose voice Manasseh recognised. "How came you here, Lanyi?" he asked.

"Diurbanu had me locked up — the devil take him!"

"What grudge had he against you?"

"He ordered me to play to him while he sat at dinner," explained the gipsy; "but I told him I wouldn't do it."

"Why not?"

"Because I won't make music for my country's enemies."

His country, poor fellow! What share had he in that country beyond the right to tramp the public highway, and make himself a mud hut for shelter?

"Then he gave me a cuff," continued the gipsy, "had me shut up here, and promised to hang me. Well, he may break me on the wheel, for aught I care, but I won't play for him even if he smashes my fiddle for refusing."

"Well, don't be down-hearted, my little man," said Manasseh, cheerily.

"I'm not a bit down-hearted," declared the other. "I only thought I'd ask you not to throw away your cigar-stump when you've finished smoking. You can walk, your feet are free; come here when you are through with your cigar, and let it fall into my mouth, so that I can chew it."

"But you'll find it a hot mouthful."

"So much the better."

This cynical gipsy phlegm exactly suited Manasseh's mood, and he exerted himself to cheer the poor fellow up, promising to secure his release as soon as he himself should gain an audience with Diurbanu.

"But you won't get out of here yourself in a hurry," returned the gipsy. "Once in Diurbanu's hands, you might as well be in the hangman's. Already he has put to death seven envoys who came to treat for peace, and they were only St. George peasants. So what will he do to you who are an Adorjan and wear a seal ring? But you've a breathing-spell yet. The others served him as a little relish before dinner; you are to be kept for dessert. One drinks a glass of spirits at a gulp, but black coffee is to be sipped and enjoyed. I know this Diurbanu well, and you'll know him, too, before he's through with you. I'll bet you my fiddle, Manasseh, you won't live to see another day; but it serves you right! You could handle three such men as Diurbanu in a fair fight; yet, instead of meeting him on the battle-field, you walk right into his clutches and let him bind you fast — like Christ on the cross."

"Take not that name in vain, you rogue!" commanded Manasseh, sternly, "or I'll let you feel the weight of my foot."

"Kick me if you wish to," returned the vagrant, imperturbably; "but, all the same, if I had been Christ I wouldn't have chosen a miserable donkey to ride on, but would have sent for the best horse out of Baron Wesselenyi's stud; and as soon as I had the nag between my legs, I would have snapped my fingers at old Pontius Pilate."

The gipsy's eloquence was here interrupted by the sound of a key turning in the outer door of the cellar.

"They're coming!" cried the fiddler; "and I sha'n't get your cigar-stump, Manasseh. They'll take me out first."

Through the hole above the iron door a reddish light could now be seen. Presently the iron door itself was opened, and two men, bearing pitch-pine torches, entered, and then stood one on each side of the door. Diurbanu came last, dressed in the costume of a Wallachian military commander, his face flushed with wine and evil passions, and his long hair falling over his shoulders. Despite his disguise, Manasseh recognised him at once. He saw that the gipsy's words had conveyed no idle warning. The man before him was none other than Benjamin Vajdar. Yet the prisoner lost nothing of his composure, but with head erect and unflinching gaze faced his deadly enemy.

' Well, Manasseh Adorjan," began the other, "you asked to see me, and here I am. Do you know me now?"

"You are called Diurbanu," replied Manasseh, coldly.

"And don't you know another name for me? Don't I remind you of an old acquaintance?"

"To him whom you resemble, I have nothing to say. I have come to you as to Diurbanu, I have placed in your hands the peace-treaty which your people made with my people, and I demand its observance."

"To convince you that I am not merely Diurbanu, but also another, look here." With that he called one of the torch-bearers and held to the flame the paper he had received from Manasseh.

The latter shrugged his shoulders and blew a cloud of cigar-smoke.

"Do you understand now," continued Diurbanu, "that there is one man in the world who has sworn to march against Toroczko, treaty or no treaty, to leave not one stone on another in that town, and not one of its people alive to tell the story of its destruction? My day has come at last — and Toroczko's night." The speaker's features took on at these words an expression more like that of a hyena than of a human being.

"Idle threats!" muttered Manasseh, scornfully, between his teeth.

"Idle threats, are they?" retorted the other, striking the hilt of his sword and raising his head haughtily. "You think, do you, that I am joking, and that I will take pity on you?"

"Oh, as for me, you may do what you please with me — torture me, kill me, if you choose. I am ready. But that will not help you to take Toroczko. All are in arms there and waiting for you. Go ahead with your plan. You'll find many an old acquaintance to receive you there. Our defences are abundantly able to withstand your soldiers, who, you know well enough, are tired of fighting and have no love for storming ramparts. Kill me, if you wish, but there will be only one man the less against you; and all the satisfaction you and your men will get from Toroczko will be broken heads. Not one stone will you disturb in all the town."

"We'll soon make you sing another tune," returned Diurbanu, and he began to roll up his sleeves, like an executioner preparing to torture his victim. "You shall hear our plan. I will be perfectly honest with you. While a part of my forces conduct a feigned assault in the valley, and so engage the attention of your men, my main body will descend on the town from the direction of the Szekler Stone, and will assail it in the rear, where none but women and children are left to receive the attack. What the fate of these women and children is likely to be, you may conjecture from the fact that the assaulting party is led by a woman, — a woman whose heart is full of bitter hatred, a maiden whose father and two brothers have been killed before her eyes, a proud girl whom your brothers have driven from their door with insulting words. This woman is Zenobia, Ciprianu's daughter, once your brother Jonathan's sweetheart, but now betrothed to me — or, at least, she fancies she is. While I keep your armed forces busy, she will knock at the door of your house. At her signal the work of carnage and destruction will begin. Your whole family will fall into her hands."

Manasseh shuddered with horror, and drew a deep breath. His head was no longer proudly erect, his self-confidence was gone. "God's will be done!" he murmured.

"So I've found your tender spot, have I?" cried the other, with an exultant laugh. "Just think what is in store for your wife (but what am I saying? She is not your wife) — your mistress."

At this insult to his adored Blanka, Manasseh's wrath blazed up and mastered him. He spit his burning cigar stump into the speaker's face. It was the utmost he could do. The other swallowed his rage at the indignity and wiped the ashes from his face, which presently broke into a smile — a hideous smile.

"Very good, Manasseh! One more score to charge up against you. I don't attempt to even the account on your unfeeling body, but on your soul, which I know how to torture. For this last insult, as well as for a hundred former injuries, I shall wreak ample revenge on Blanka Zboroy, before your own turn comes."

"Do not count too confidently on that," rejoined Manasseh. "The moment your ruffian crew break into our house, two women will put their pistols to each other's hearts, and your men will find only a couple of dead bodies."

"Ha, ha! To deprive you of even this last consolation, I beg to assure you that the two women will not lay a finger on their pistols, because Zenobia is to gain entrance to them before the men appear. She will come to them in the guise of a friend and deliverer, promising to rescue them for Jonathan's sake. She will furnish them Wallachian peasant clothes, help them about their disguise, and, amidst the general confusion, bring them away with her, alive and unharmed, to St. George, so that you will have the pleasure of seeing Blanka Zboroy in my power. Further details I will leave to your own imagination; and to enable you to pursue these pleasant fancies undisturbed I will now say good night."

"Manasseh!" called a voice from the darkness, when Diurbanu had gone.

"Who calls? Or is it only a rat?" Manasseh had forgotten that his dungeon contained another prisoner beside himself.

"Yes, it's a rat," answered the voice. "I heard my schoolmaster tell a story once about a lion that fell into a snare, and a mouse came and gnawed the ropes so as to set him free. If you will bend down here I'll untie your knots with my teeth."

Manasseh complied. The gipsy had splendid teeth, and he bit and tugged at the knots until the prisoner's hands were free, and he felt himself another man altogether.

"Now pull this stake out from under my knees," directed the fiddler, whose hands were tied together and passed over his bent knees, where they were held fast by a stick of wood. His legs being freed, he slipped the cords from his hands like a pair of gloves. He was no little elated over his achievements. "And now we will sell our lives dear!" he cried, with a glad leap into the air.

The rattle of small arms in the distance began to be heard, and through the little opening over the iron door a ruddy light as from a fire became visible. At first Manasseh thought some one was coming again with a torch; but as the iron door did not open, and the red light grew constantly brighter, he finally guessed the cause of the illumination. Those who were now assaulting Toroczko must have set fire to St. George first, to furnish the people of the former place an example of what they were themselves to expect, and perhaps also to supply a light for the attacking party. The whole village was in flames. So it appeared that Diurbanu's words had conveyed no empty threat. The work of revenge had begun with St. George, and now came Toroczko's turn. That the latter place was offering a spirited resistance could be inferred from the lively firing that was to be plainly heard. But how would it be when the attack in the rear should begin, from the direction of the Szekler Stone? Could Aaron and his forty men offer any effectual opposition to the invaders?

Night must have fallen ere this. Manasseh paced his prison cell in almost unbearable impatience, as he listened to the distant firing, and watched the red glow over the door growing gradually brighter. A heavy booming as of cannon was heard from the Szekler Stone. So the attack in that quarter had begun, and Aaron's battery was at work. Zenobia must be leading the enemy into the town, for surely no means at Aaron's command could repulse the assaulting party.

Manasseh was fast losing all self-control. "I will find a way out of this!" he cried, in a frenzy.

Running to the door, he seized its iron ring and shook the heavy portal in impotent fury. Then he turned back and surveyed his place of confinement with searching eyes. It was now fairly well lighted by the ruddy glare that came through the air-hole.

The place had formerly been a wine cellar, but every cask and barrel was now gone. The support on which they had rested, however, remained behind. This was a massive oak beam which had served to keep the wine casks from the damp earthen floor of the cellar.

"Lanyi," commanded Manasseh, in quick, energetic tones, "take hold of one end of this beam, and we will batter the door down."

"I'm your man!" responded the gipsy, with alacrity. He was small of person, but every sinew in his wiry frame was of steel. He grasped the beam behind while Manasseh carried the forward end, and so they converted it into a Roman battering-ram.

The booming of cannon was drowned now by the pounding on the iron door. The two prisoners wondered that no one in the house seemed to hear them. But those who might before have heard were engaged elsewhere, while to those outside the noises in the street drowned all tumult in the cellar.

At length the lock gave way under the tremendous battering to which it was subjected, and soon the door flew open. The outer door was of wood, and yielded readily.

"Hold on, stand back!" cried the gipsy, as Manasseh was about to run up the stairs. "Wait until I take a peep and see if the coast is clear. I'll mayhap find a gun that some one has thrown down."

"But I can't wait," returned the other, brushing him aside. "I need no gun. The first man that dares get in my way shall furnish me with arms. I am going to seek my wife! Let him who values his life run from before me!"

He burst through the door, and sprang up the steps. No sooner was he in the open air than an armed figure confronted him. But Manasseh did not strike down this person, for it was a woman,—Zenobia. A dirk and a brace of pistols were stuck in her belt.

"Take care!" she cried to Manasseh, and she made as if to shield him from view with her cloak. "Stay where you are!"

But Manasseh seized her by the wrist and shouted hoarsely in her ear:

"Where are my wife and sister?"

Zenobia understood his tone and the frenzy with which he grasped her arm. With a sad smile she made answer:

"Calm yourself. They are well cared for. They are at home in their own house, where no one can harm them."

He looked at her, in doubt as to her meaning. Zenobia handed him her weapons.

"Here, take these," she commanded. "You may need them. I have no further use for them." Thus, disarmed and in Manasseh's power, she stood calmly before him. "Now be quiet and listen to me," she went on.

The cannon thundered on the Szekler Stone in one continuous roar, while fiery rockets shot from Hidas Peak in a wide curve and fell into the valley below, hastening the mad flight of routed and panic-stricken men, who fled as if for their lives to Gyertyamos, Kapolna, and Bedellö, to the woods, and into the mountain defiles. The burning village of St. George no longer offered them an asylum, and its streets were by this time nearly deserted.

"That is over," said the Wallachian girl, calmly, and she led Manasseh into the empty house. "Aaron might as well stop now," she murmured to herself; "for there are no more to frighten." Then to Manasseh: "You know it takes two to get up a scare, — one to do the frightening and the other to be frightened. If I had but said to our men, 'Stop running away! Those are not the brass cannon of the national guard, but only Aaron Adorjan's holes in the side of the rock, where he is harmlessly exploding gunpowder; and that roll of drums that you hear on the Csegez road does not mean an approaching brigade of Hungarians, but is only the idle rub-a-dub of a band of school children,' — if I had said that, Toroczko would now lie in ashes. But I held my tongue and let the panic do its work. With this day's rout all is ended, and in an hour's time you can safely return home. When you meet your wife and sister, tell them you saw me this evening, and let them know that the Wallachian girl has forgotten nothing — do you hear me? — nothing. They wrote me a beautiful letter, both of them on one sheet of paper, a letter full of love and kindness. They called me sister and invited me to your wedding, promising me that Jonathan should be there, too, and making me promise to come. And when they had written the letter they even coaxed the stiff-necked Aaron, who hates us Wallachians like poison, to add his signature to it, though I could see in the very way he wrote his name how he disliked to do it. I promised to come, and I kept my word. And Jonathan came with me — I brought him. That night I told your wife and your sister that I should come to Toroczko once more, and not with empty hands, but should bring them something. I have come, and I bring them — you, Manasseh, alive and unharmed. That is how a Wallachian girl remembers a kindness."

She turned to go, but then, as if remembering something, came back and drew a ring from her finger.

"Here," said she, "I will give you this ring. Do you remember it?"

"It belonged to my sister," answered Manasseh, in a tone of sadness. "I bought it for her to give to her lover as an engagement ring. Soon afterward he deserted her."

"I know it. Her name is engraved inside the ring. The pretty fellow who gave it me told me all about it. He said to me: 'My pearl, my turtle-dove, my diamond, see here, I place this ring on your finger and swear to be true to you. But I can't marry you as long as that other woman lives who wears my betrothal ring, for our laws forbid it. That woman dwells in the big house at Toroczko. You know her name and know what to do to enable me to marry you.'"

Manasseh trembled with suppressed passion as he listened. The girl handed him the ring and proceeded:

"Give her back her ring; it belongs to her. And tell me, did not this man come to you and tell you how a shameless creature in woman's form was to steal into your house, and, under the pretext of rescuing your wife and sister, lead them away to misery and dishonour? Speak, did he not tell you some such story?"

"Yes, he did."

Zenobia laughed in hot anger and scorn. "Well, then," said she, in conclusion, "I have another present for you. The proverb says, 'Little kindnesses strengthen the bonds of friendship.' And this will be the smallest of gifts I could possibly make you. The handsome young man who gave me this ring, and is betrothed to me — or thinks he is — lies somewhere yonder in a ditch. His horse took fright at the tumult, and threw him so that he broke his ankle. His fleeing troops left him lying there; they stumbled over him and ran on; no one offered to help him up. They all hate him, and they see in his fall a punishment from Heaven. The Wallachian fears to lend aid to him that is thought to lie under God's displeasure. The fallen man's horse you will find in the church. Mount it and hasten back to Toroczko. As for the rider, you will do well to hang him to the nearest tree. You have a gipsy here to help you. And now farewell."

She blew a little whistle that hung at her neck, and a lad appeared leading two mountain ponies. Zenobia mounted one, waved a final adieu to Manasseh, and rode away with her attendant toward Bedellö.

"Come, sir," said the gipsy, touching Manasseh's elbow, "let us set about what she told us to do. You go into the church and get Diurbanu's horse while I go and find the rider. You have two pistols and a dagger. What, don't you want them? Then give them to me."

The fiddler was proud to find himself so well armed. He made a belt of the cords he had brought with him from the cellar, and stuck the weapons into it.

"Now we must hurry," he urged, "or the people will be coming back."

While Manasseh made his way to the church, his companion hastened in search of Diurbanu. The little man had sharp eyes and keen wits. He conjectured that the fallen rider, with his broken leg, would avoid the dry harvest-fields, over which the fire was rapidly spreading, and would be found in the moist ditch beside the road. Nor was he wrong in this surmise. He was soon saluted in a voice that he recognised.

"Gipsy, come here!"

"Not so fast," the fiddler replied. "How do I know you won't shoot me?"

"I have nothing to shoot with. I am lying in the water, so that even if I had my pistols the powder would be soaked through."

"But what do you want of me?"

"I wish you to save my life."

"And won't you have me locked up afterward?"

"If you will help me get away from here I'll make you a rich man. You shall have a thousand florins."

"If you had promised me less I should have believed you sooner."

"But I will pay you the money now. Come, take me on your back and carry me away."

"Where to?"

"Into the church yonder."

The gipsy laughed aloud. "First do your swearing out here, then," said he, "for no one may curse God in his house. But what will you do in the church?"

"I will wait while you run to Gyertyamos and hire a carriage for me. You shall have a thousand florins, the driver the same, and for every hour before sunrise that you accomplish your errand you shall receive an extra hundred."

"You won't see the sun rise," muttered the fiddler to himself as he obeyed the other's directions.

The burden proved not too heavy for the little man's back; he could have carried him all the way to Gyertyamos, but the horse must obey his rider, so into the church he went with him.

"There, Manasseh," he cried, in triumph, "there's our man!" And he dropped his burden on the stone floor.

Diurbanu cried out with pain as he fell, then raised himself on one elbow and met Manasseh's gaze.

"Kill me and be done with it," he muttered, in sullen despair.

But Manasseh remained standing with folded arms before him. "No, Benjamin Vajdar," said he, "you shall not die by my hand. He who kills Cain is seven times cursed. My promise to an angel whom you would have destroyed is your safeguard. I shall neither kill you myself nor let any one else lay hands on you. You are to live many days yet and continue in the way you have begun, obeying the sinful impulses of your wicked nature, and doing evil to those that have done nothing but good to you. You weigh upon our house like a curse, but it is God's will thus to prove and try our hearts. Fulfil your destiny, plot your wicked schemes against us, and then at last, broken, humbled, scorned of all the world beside, come back to us and sue for pity at the door of those to whom you have shown no pity. God's will be done!"

Manasseh allowed himself to use no reproach, no word of withering scorn, in thus addressing his enemy. He even spoke in German, to spare the fallen man's shame in the gipsy's presence. He had the horse in readiness for its master, and bade the fiddler help him lift the injured rider into the saddle and tie him there with ropes to ensure him against a second fall, especially as one foot was now unfit for the stirrup.

"Aha!" cried the little gipsy, "a good idea! We'll take him alive and show him off in Toroczko."

The fires in the village made the spirited horse restive and hard to manage. Manasseh took him by the bridle and led him out of the church, the gipsy following at the animal's heels.

"Turn to the right and begone!" whispered Manasseh to the rider, and he caused the horse to make a sudden spring to one side.

"Oh, he's got away!" cried the gipsy, in great chagrin. "Why didn't you let me take the bridle? Catch me bringing you another thousand-florin prize, to be thrown away like that!"

"Never mind, my lad. From this day on you shall find a full trencher always ready for you at our house. But now let us start for home."

Six weeks later Benjamin Vajdar made his reappearance in Vienna, the net result of his expedition to Transylvania being, first, a heavy draft on the bank-account of his chief, and, second, a limping gait for himself, which proved a sad affliction to him on the dancing-floor.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A CRUEL PARTING.

At the close of the war the young men of Toroczko who had served in the national guard returned home and resumed their work in the mines and iron foundries. The mining classes had always been exempt from military service in the imperial army, and so the Toroczko young men had no fear of being soon called away again from their peaceful industry.

Out of these young artisans Manasseh set about forming a guild for the better working of the Toroczko mines. He wished to make intelligent and skilful mining engineers of them, and so enable them to avail themselves, more fully than they had yet done, of the mineral resources of their native hills. And having now had some experience of military discipline, these young men offered him material of no mean order for his experiment. They seconded his efforts with a will, reposing the utmost confidence in their leader, and perceiving that he knew thoroughly what he was undertaking.

It was a great piece of good fortune for Manasseh that he had a partner in his enterprise who was in fullest sympathy with him, and in whom he could place the utmost trust. This partner kept the accounts of the business in which the two had invested their all, and showed the keenest intelligence and the most watchful vigilance in guarding their joint interests. This expert accountant and able manager was none other than Manasseh's wife. In the third year of her marriage, however, she had something else to engage her attention beside iron-mining: in that year the house of Adorjan was increased by the birth of twins, — Bela and Ilonka, the former a likeness in miniature of his father, and the latter a second Blanka. But their aunt Anna insisted on sharing the mother's cares, and soon she assumed almost entire charge of the little ones, thus enabling Blanka to resume her business duties.

In this way everything was running smoothly, when one evening there came a government order requiring all men between certain ages to report within three days at Karlsburg for military service; any who refused would be treated as deserters. Three quarters of Manasseh's workmen came under the terms of this order; but they promptly obeyed and went to Karlsburg, where, after being found physically qualified, they were enrolled for six years' service, — three extra years being added to the usual term because they had neglected to report voluntarily.

This was a hard blow to Manasseh's enterprise. He resolved to go to Vienna and petition for the exemption of his employees from military duty, claiming for them the miners' privileges which they had enjoyed hitherto.

Well acquainted though he had been in government circles in the past, Manasseh now found everything changed and scarcely a familiar face left. Like the veriest stranger, he was forced to wait with the crowd of other petitioners in the war minister's anteroom until his turn should come. Much to his surprise, however, the great man's door suddenly opened and Prince Cagliari advanced to meet him with a face all smiles and words of honey on his lips.

"Ah, my dear friend, how glad I am to see you!" began the prince. "All well at home? That's good. And what brings you hither, may I ask? You come on behalf of your countrymen who were recently drafted? Ah, yes." (Then in a whispered aside: "We'll soon arrange that; a word from me will suffice.") Again aloud: "A very difficult matter, sir, very difficult indeed! These recent complications in the Orient compel us to raise our army to its highest effective strength." (Once more in a whisper, with a stealthy pressure of the hand: "Pray give yourself not the slightest concern. I'll speak to his Excellency about it this very minute.")

Manasseh was by no means pleased at finding himself placed under obligations to Prince Cagliari, but he could not well refuse such a gracious offer of assistance. Accordingly, when the prince returned and smilingly informed him that he had put the petition in the minister's hands, and obtained a promise that it should be speedily taken under favourable consideration, Manasseh forced himself to smile in return and to express his acknowledgments to his intercessor as he took leave of him.

The petition was, in fact, taken under early advisement, and three days after Manasseh's return to Toroczko he was summoned to Karlsburg to learn the issue.

"Your memorial has reached us from Vienna with a refusal," was the chilling announcement that greeted him.

"Impossible!" cried Manasseh, in astonishment. "I was promised a favourable answer."

The government official only shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"On what ground is the petition rejected?" asked Manasseh.

"On the ground that those for whom you petition forfeited their privileges as miners by taking up arms in '48. Having taken them up once, they cannot refuse to do so a second time."

Manasseh's bitter reflections were somewhat sweetened by the thought that, after all, he was not in any way indebted to Prince Cagliari. But he owed him more than he suspected. As he was turning to go, the government official detained him a moment longer.

"I hope," said he, as if by way of a casual remark, "that your own exemption from service is a matter of no uncertainty."

"My own exemption!" repeated Manasseh, in amazement. It had not once occurred to him that he, a former government councillor, might be drafted into the army. But he controlled his indignation at what seemed an ill-timed jest, and added, calmly: "At any rate, I cannot be charged with having forfeited my rights as a miner by taking up arms in 1848."

"That remains to be seen," was the cool reply. Then, after some search among his papers, the official produced a document from which he read as follows: "'Mr. Manasseh Adorjan is alleged, on unquestionable authority, to have participated in the fight at St. George and Toroczko. In fact, he with his own hands took General Diurbanu prisoner and bound him with a rope to his horse. Only the animal's impatience of control saved the rider and secured him his freedom.'"

After listening to this astounding accusation against him, Manasseh recognised that he was far more deeply in Cagliari's debt than he had supposed.

"I have accomplished my mission in brilliant style," was his report when he reached home. "Not only my workmen are drafted, but I also along with them."

The women were struck with consternation, but Aaron burst out laughing.

"Oh, you poor innocent!" he cried, "how can you be a soldier with one shoulder six inches higher than the other?"

"What, am I really so misshapen as that?" asked Manasseh, in surprise.

"To be sure, or at least you can make yourself so for the nonce. Don't you remember how our neighbour Methuselah's grandson went limping about with one leg longer than the other, when the recruiting officer was here?"

"Methuselah's grandson may do that kind of thing," answered Manasseh, "but not an Adorjan. I can't practise any deceit of that sort."

"Deceit!" cried Aaron; "we are deceiving no one — only the government."

"And is the government no one?" asked his brother.

"Well, it's all right to outwit the Austrians," muttered Aaron.

"I don't agree with you," was all Manasseh could say. "If I am ordered to march I shall obey. My poor lads are obliged to exchange the pick for the rifle, and shall I, their master, shirk my duty?"

"Manasseh is right," declared Anna. "What will do for a grandson of Methuselah will not do for an Adorjan. When an Adorjan's name is called he must answer to it like a man. Our brother will be the pride of his regiment, and will soon rise to be an officer; then he can obtain his discharge and come home."

Manasseh pressed his sister's hand in gratitude for these words of courage and good cheer.

"Yes, but suppose he has to go to war?" objected Blanka.

"Never fear," returned her husband. "Even if Austria becomes involved in the present dispute, the Hungarian regiments are not likely to be sent to the front. They will be stationed in Lombardy, where all is as quiet as possible."

"Then I will go with you," said Blanka, brightening up.

"No, you must stay with us," Anna interposed. "You and the children are best cared for here, and, besides, if Manasseh goes away you will have to look after the iron works. New hands are to be engaged, and ever so much is to be done all over again. How can you think of leaving us in the lurch? There will be no one but you to manage things; you alone can direct the works and put bread into our poor people's mouths."

"Ah, me!" sighed the distressed wife; "and must I live perhaps a whole year without seeing Manasseh — a whole autumn, winter, spring, and summer?"

Anna's eyes filled with tears and a sigh escaped her lips. How many a season had she seen pass, without hope and without complaint! Blanka knew the meaning of those tears, and she hastened to kiss them away.

And so it came about that the Toroczko young men, and Manasseh with them, were sent off to Lombardy. Thence every month came a letter to Toroczko, to Blanka Adorjan, from her devoted husband. The very first one told her how he had risen from private to corporal and then from corporal to sergeant. But there he stuck. On parting with his wife, he had consoled her with the confident assurance that in a year, at most, she would see him return; but the year lengthened into five. Little Bela no longer sent meaningless scrawls to his father, but wrote short letters in a round, clear hand, and even added verses on his father's birthday. But not a single furlough could that father obtain to go home and see his dear ones. Nor did he gain his long-expected promotion to a lieutenancy. The colonel of the regiment wrote letters with his own hand to Blanka, praising her husband and telling her how he was looked up to by all his comrades and esteemed by his officers; and yet he could not secure his promotion. Even the commandant at Verona had interceded for him in vain. He must have a powerful enemy who pursued him with relentless persistence.

Blanka well knew who that enemy was, but she took no steps — for she felt that they would have been useless — to try to soften him. Her family were united in opposing any suggestion on her part of undertaking a journey. She did not even venture to visit her husband in Verona. An instinct, a foreboding, and also certain timely warnings, kept her safe at home.

This long period of trial and suspense was not without its chastening effect on the young wife's character. It developed her as only stern experience can. On her shoulders alone rested the cares which her husband had formerly shared with her. The iron works were now under her sole management. Foresight, vigilance, and technical knowledge were called for, and nobly did she meet the demand.

Those five years brought her many a difficult problem to solve and many an anxious hour. Once a hail-storm destroyed all her crops two days before the harvest, and she was forced to buy grain from her own purse. Again it happened that the crop of iron itself was ruined by something far worse than hail. Some one at Vienna dealt a mortal blow to all the iron mines in the land with a single drop of ink. He lowered the tariff, and native iron production thenceforth could go on only at a loss. But Blanka was determined not to close her mines and her foundries. She recognised the hand that had dealt her this severe blow, but she knew the harsh decree would have to be repealed before long, such an outcry was sure to go up against it. So she pawned her jewels, kept all her men at work, — they seconded her efforts nobly by volunteering to take less than full pay, — and wrote nothing at all about her troubles to Manasseh.

CHAPTER XXV.

SECRETS OF THE COMMISSARIAT.

THE mysterious workings of the commissary department are beyond the understanding of ordinary mortals. Therefore let it suffice us to take only a passing glance at those mysteries.

Benjamin Vajdar was enjoying a tête-à-tête with the Marchioness Caldariva after the theatre.

"Well, what has my cripple to report of his day's doings?" asked Rozina. "Is all going well in Italy?"

"We signed a contract to-day for supplying our army there with forty thousand cattle," was Vajdar's reply.

"Ah, that will make about two hundredweight of beef to a man," returned the other, reckoning on her fingers.

"Not an ounce of which will ever reach them," said the secretary, with a smile; "but we shall make a couple of millions out of the transaction, — a mere bagatelle for Papa Cagliari, however; not enough to keep him in champagne."

"A very clever stroke of yours," commented the marchioness, with approval; "and I can tell you of another little operation the prince has in hand just now. Bring me the morocco pocketbook out of my writing-desk, please."

Vajdar limped across the room and brought the pocketbook. Rozina opened it and drew forth an official-looking document.

"Here is a contract for so and so many bushels of grain to be furnished to the army. You see it foots up a large sum, but the profits won't be so very great, after all, owing to the recent rise in prices on the corn exchange."

"Oh, don't worry about that," interposed Benjamin, with a knowing smile. "Who will ever know the difference if a quarter part of the total weight is chaff and clay? It will all grind up into excellent flour, and when the soldier eats his barley bread or his rye loaf it will taste all the better to him. There is nearly half a million florins' clear profit in the transaction, at a moderate estimate."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the beautiful Cyrene. "So the soldiers must eat half a million florins' worth of chaff and clay to enable Papa Cagliari to take his morning bath in champagne."

"Well, what of that? It makes, at most, only two florins' worth to a man, and the soldier who loves his country ought to be glad to eat two florins' worth of her soil. Has the prince any other contract under consideration?"

"Yes, a very important one. He has procured an order that the troops in Italy shall wear for their summer uniform cotton blouses instead of linen, and he has the contract for furnishing the material."

"But the prices named here are very low," objected Vajdar, reading from the paper Rozina had handed him.

"Ah, but let me explain. The cotton is to be thirty inches wide, with so and so many threads to the warp — according to the specifications. But what soldier will ever think of counting the threads in his blouse, or know whether it was cut from goods thirty inches wide or twenty-eight? So, you see, with a little trimming here and a little paring there we can make a good hundred thousand florins out of the job."

"But are our tracks well covered? Is there no risk in all this?"

"Fear nothing. There are eyeglasses that blind the sharpest of eyes."

"How if there are some eyes that will not be fitted with these glasses?"

"Again I say, never fear. A victorious campaign covers a multitude of sins."

"And a lost one brings everything to light."

"Not at all. A slaughtered army tells no tales.

But, by the way, is not our Toroczko friend among those who are likely enough to fall some day before the French and Italians?"

"He is still in Lombardy," said Vajdar, with a significant nod of the head. "We have our eyes on him."

"I am curious to know what this apostle of peace will do when he is ordered into battle. You know, he and his comrades are Unitarians and entertain scruples against shedding blood, except in defence of home and country. Will Manasseh Adorjan fight when he is ordered to, or throw down his arms?"

"In either case, he will die," declared Benjamin Vajdar.

"I should prefer to have him only wounded," said the marchioness. "Then his mate would leave her nest in the mountains and hasten to nurse him in the hospital; and contagious diseases are not uncommon in military hospitals, where both patients and nurses are often swept off by them — so quickly, too, that no one thinks of inquiring very closely into the matter."

"You are impatient, marchioness," commented the secretary.

"And you choose to remark upon it because I would have the prince a widower and a free man?"

With that the fair Cyrene nestled close at her fellow-conspirator's side, and proceeded to caress him and to murmur soft words in his ear.

And so the night sped, and the first peep of dawn overtook the two before they separated.

CHAPTER XXVI

SOLFERINO.

One of the most momentous battles in history was in progress, and the battalion in which Manasseh Adorjan still served as a sergeant stood from early morning until afternoon among the reserves, watching the fight.

Leaning on his gun, Manasseh thoughtfully observed the transformation of that earthly paradise into a scene of slaughter. He thought how, in times of peace, the cry of a single human being in distress would call ready succour and excite the warmest sympathy ; but now, when men were dying by thousands, their fellows looked on in the coldest indifference. He asked himself whether this fearful state of things, this deplorable sacrifice of a country's best and bravest sons, was a necessity, and must still go on for ages to come. And while he thus communed with himself he, too, held in his hands a weapon calculated to carry not only death to a valiant foe, but also sorrow and anguish to that foeman's wife and mother, and perhaps destitution to his family.

To the north of the fortress of Solferino rose a wooded height, since known to the historians of that battle as Cypress Hill, and distinguished as the point around which the conflict raged most fiercely. Occupied alternately by each side, the opposing batteries stormed it in succession, and the squadrons, now of one army, now of the other, marched up to assault it. But though they marched up, Manasseh saw none of them return. Austrians, French, and Italians, all seemed to be swallowed up alike in that maelstrom of blood and fire.

At four o'clock in the afternoon the battle was at its height. In the heat of the conflict one could see uniforms of all three armies mingled in inextricable confusion. The Austrian forces were at last becoming exhausted with toil and hunger. Whole regiments were there that had not tasted meat for a week — where were those forty thousand cattle? — and the bread dealt out to them was ill-baked, mouldy, gritty, and altogether unfit to eat.

A final and concentrated effort was determined upon. Reserves to the front! Cypress Hill was to be stormed once more. A battalion of yagers, the pride of the Austrian army, charged up the fatal hill and succeeded in taking it, after which the rattle of musketry beyond announced that the fight was being continued on the farther side.

At this point Manasseh's battalion was ordered to hold the hill while the yagers were pushed farther forward. The order was obeyed, and then Manasseh learned what the cypress-crowned height really was: it was a cemetery, the burial-ground of the surrounding district, and each cypress marked a grave. But the dead under the sod lay not more closely packed than the fallen soldiers with whose bodies the place was covered. Cypress Hill was a double graveyard, heaped with dead and dying Frenchmen, Italians, Austrians, Hungarians, Poles, and Croatians, their bodies disfigured and bleeding and heaped in chaotic confusion over the mounds beneath which slept the regular occupants of the place.

In the soldier's march to glory each step is a human corpse. Manasseh took care to step over and between the prostrate forms before him. Gaining the summit of the hill, he had an open view of the prospect beyond. A large farm, since known to history as the *Madonna della Scoperta*, lay before him. A high terrace facing the hill had been converted by the enemy into a fortress, which commanded the cemetery, and which the yagers were now pressing forward to take. The charge was gallantly led, but after a fierce struggle, in which the assailants exhausted their ammunition, and the engagement became a hand-to-hand fight, the Austrians were driven back in confusion.

Manasseh's battalion was then commanded to charge the terrace, from which the enemy's battery was dealing such deadly destruction, and to capture and hold the *Madonna della Scoperta*. The major gave the necessary orders, but it was to Manasseh that every eye was turned at this critical moment. Had he but shaken his head the whole battalion would have stood still and refused to advance a step. If he said the word, however, his comrades would follow him, and attempt the impossible.

Manasseh looked up at the clouded heavens above, and breathed a sigh. The hour had come when he must bow before the iron will of destiny. He, the apostle of peace, must plunge into the midst of bloody strife. "Thy will be done!" he murmured, then advanced to the front of the battalion, and turned to address his comrades.

"Forward!"

They obeyed him with alacrity, singing as they advanced, "A mighty fortress is our God," and so began the assault.

Not a shot was fired as they pushed forward at double-quick in the face of a murderous artillery discharge from the terrace above. Gaining the foot of the scarp, they planted their bayonets in the earthern wall, and so mounted the rampart, those behind helping up those in front. As they sang the last stanza of their hymn, the *Madonna della Scoperta* was taken — without the firing of a single shot. The major of the battalion was beside himself with pride and exultation. He embraced Manasseh, and kissed him on both cheeks.

"To-morrow will see you an officer with a medal of honour on your breast," was his confident prediction.

Manasseh smiled sadly. He knew better than the other what to expect.

Meanwhile the enemy had not given up the fight. The terrace, they perceived, must be retaken, and a detachment of French troops was advancing to storm it.

"Let them come on!" cried the major, confidently. "We can handle them, ten to one. Give them a volley, my lads!"

But this time Manasseh shook his head, whereupon the whole battalion grounded arms.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed the major, astounded.

Manasseh raised his hand to heaven. "*Egy az Isten!*" he cried, and all his comrades followed his example.

"What do you say?" asked the bewildered officer.

"We swear by the God who has said 'Thou shalt not kill!'" was Manasseh's reply.

"But you are soldiers, and on the battle-field."

"We do our duty, we go whither we are ordered, and we can die if we must; but we will not take human life except in defence of our homes and our fatherland."

"But, man, the enemy will kill you."

"So be it."

The commander threatened, begged, wept — all in vain. The only reply was, "*Egy az Isten!*" The men were willing to discharge their pieces if necessary, but it would only be a waste of ammunition: they would fire into the air.

Troops were now rapidly moving on the threatened position from two directions, one party to assault, the other to defend. Fearful slaughter seemed imminent, and nothing was left for those who had so gallantly carried the terrace but to die where they stood. Suddenly, however, a third power took a hand in the fray, and smote both assailants and defenders with equal fury. The black clouds that had been gathering over the battle-field opened and began such a cannonade as neither side could withstand. Wind, hail, lightning, and thunder, accompanied by an ominous darkness in which friend was indistinguishable from foe, played such havoc with the puny combatants and their mimic artillery, that all were forced to seek shelter and safety from the angry elements. Thus neither side was left in possession of the field, but a third and a mightier power than either claimed the victory in that day's fight.

Manasseh and his comrades fled with the rest before the fury of the storm. They succeeded in gaining a sheltered position where they found camp-fires burning, and thought themselves among friends. But they were mistaken. They had stumbled in the darkness upon the enemy's camp.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN HOUR OF TRIAL.

MANASSEH and those with him were taken prisoners and sent to Bresci. What befell them there is matter of history. Adorjan was surprised one morning by the receipt of the following: a coffee-coloured uniform, trimmed with red cord and its collar adorned with gold lace; a handsome sword in a gold-mounted scabbard; and an official document from the Italian war office, appointing him major of the battalion with which he had been taken prisoner.

The sight of these most unexpected presents could not but thrill Manasseh with pride and exultation. Now at last it was in his power to wreak vengeance on those who had so grievously wronged him, — to cut his way, sword in hand, back to his downtrodden fatherland, perhaps even to exact a rich retribution at the oppressor's hands, and to restore his country once more to a position of proud independence. Added to all this, the seductive picture of future fame, of undying renown as a patriot and liberator, rose before his vision. Already, as hero of the

Madonna della Scoperta, he had tasted the intoxication of martial glory. A strength and self-denial more than human seemed necessary if he would turn his back coldly on the splendid prospect that opened before him as his country's avenger and deliverer. What words can do justice to the conflicting emotions which Manasseh experienced in that hour of trial? His comrades in arms and many of his dearest friends, he felt convinced, would turn upon him with mockery and reviling if he should now still cling to his principles and refuse to disobey the commandment of his God, — "Thou shalt not kill."

In Italy every house has its image of the crucified Saviour. Manasseh stood now before one of these crucifixes, lost in troubled thought. To Jesus, too, the people had cried: "Be our general, lead us against the Romans, free your nation!" And he had answered them: "I will lead you to a heavenly kingdom, and will free all mankind." Then he was heaped with scorn and abuse, was scourged by the Roman lictors, and was finally dragged before Pontius Pilate and crucified. But not the scourging, not the crown of thorns, or the cruel nails, or the spear of Longinus, — none of these was the really hard thing to bear. A man may suffer the severest physical torture and still utter no cry. The cruelest of all was the scornful laughter of those to whom he had brought salvation and eternal life, the blame of his fellow-citizens for whom he so freely shed his life's blood. That was what only a man of divine nobility and courage could endure.

"I am but mortal!" cried the tempted man, in anguish. "I cannot attain unto such heights." And he buckled on his gold-mounted sword.

The crucified form, however, seemed to turn its eyes upon him in mild reproof and gentle encouragement. "I will lend you my aid," it seemed to say to him.

But Manasseh hastened from the room and turned his steps toward the commandant's quarters. Perturbed in mind and hardly master of himself, he started at the rattle of his own sword; and when some of his comrades saw him pass and cheered him with loud hurrahs, he hurried by and barely returned their salute.

The general received him in his breakfast-room, where he was engaged with his morning mail. Acknowledging Manasseh's greeting, he handed him an open letter. The Hungarian took it and read as follows:

> "Villafranca. Peace has been concluded. The Hungarian battalion is to be disbanded, and its members allowed to return home."

This room, too, had its crucifix. It seemed to look down on Manasseh with the same gentle reproof, and to say, "Have I failed you in your hour of trial?"

With the first ripening of the fruit in the Toroczko orchards, Manasseh and his comrades were at home. Blanka came to meet her husband as far as Kolozsvar, bringing her little daughter Ilonka with her. Bela could not come, as he had just then a school examination. At the Borev bridge a splendid reception awaited the home-comers. A handsome little lad headed the receiving party, waving a flag.

"Who is that pretty boy?" Manasseh asked his wife.

She laughed merrily, and rebuked him for not knowing his own son. But he had not seen the child for six years.

His brother Aaron, too, he hardly recognised, so gray had his hair turned under the anxieties of the past few years. The speech of welcome which the elder brother was to have delivered proved a total failure, owing to the emotion aroused in the orator's breast at sight of the returned wanderer. But the most affecting part of it all to Manasseh was the appearance of his sister Anna. The poor girl, he could not fail to see, was sinking into an early grave.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DAY OF RECKONING.

Victory had neither glossed over nor defeat buried from sight those dishonest army contracts. Louder and louder grew the murmurs against the fraud that had contributed so disastrously to the unhappy issue of the war, until at last a high military officer opened his mouth and declared, emphatically, "The parties responsible for such an outrage deserve to be hanged!"

Soon after this bold utterance a decree went forth for an investigation of the scandal and the condign punishment of the guilty ones. Confusion and panic followed in more than one family of exalted station. A nobleman of proud lineage burnt all his papers and then opened the veins of his wrists with a penknife, and so escaped the ignominy of a trial in court. Another submitted to arrest, but no sooner saw his prison door closed upon him than he despatched himself by piercing his heart with a breast-pin. Two others vanished completely from sight and hearing the very day the edict was published, and never showed themselves afterward.

Benjamin Vajdar, black with guilt as he knew himself to be, chose the shrewder course of remaining in Vienna and calmly going about his business, with all the outward confidence of spotless innocence. Suspicion is much like a watch-dog; it leaps upon the man who quails. Prince Cagliari and the Marchioness Caldariva also remained quietly in the city, and even went so far as to forego their wonted sojourn at the seashore when summer came. They seemed to have acquired a sudden extraordinary fondness for the Austrian capital.

But one day the expected happened to Benjamin Vajdar. He was called to the police bureau. The official who received him was an old friend of his who now gave signal proof of his friendliness.

"Benjamin Vajdar," said he, "you are ordered by the government to leave Vienna within twenty-four hours and go back to your native town, beyond which you are forbidden to stir."

This mandate was a surprise to Vajdar, who had expected to be arrested and tried, and had made his preparations accordingly. However, there was nothing to do but submit to the inevitable. Further particulars or explanations were denied him, except that he would find a special police officer placed at his service from that moment until he reached his destination, — which was a polite intimation that he was thenceforth under government surveillance, and that any attempt at flight would be frustrated.

He returned at once to his house, which adjoined that of the Marchioness Caldariva. Indeed, from his bedroom a secret passage, already referred to, led into Rozina's boudoir; but the clock-door had seldom opened to the secretary of late. Toward seven o'clock in the evening he saw a closed carriage drive away from the next door.

"She is going to the opera," said he to himself as he watched the vehicle turn a corner and disappear. He donned hat and coat and sauntered after it, the emissary of the police always ten steps in the rear. Arrived at the opera-house, he purchased tickets for himself and his faithful attendant, and then made his way to the box of the marchioness.

Rozina received him with apparent cordiality and listened to his whispered account of what had befallen him.

"Have you talked this over with Prince Cagliari?" she asked.

"No, and I shall not," replied Vajdar, with significant emphasis. "This is his doing."

"What makes you think so, pray?" asked the marchioness, with an air of surprise. "Why should he plot the ruin of his own secretary and confidant?"

"You yourself are the cause," was the retort.

The beautiful woman bent her head still nearer to him. Even her cruel heart felt the compliment conveyed in this acknowledgment of her power. "And what do you wish of me, my poor boy?" she murmured softly in his ear.

"I wish an interview with you after the opera — a strictly confidential interview."

"Very well. Come to me as soon as I get home, and I will admit you."

"No; you shall not turn me away so easily, with an empty promise."

"What, must I swear to you, then?"

"No, give me the little key, and I shall be sure of gaining admittance."

"I am almost afraid to trust you with it," objected the marchioness, with an arch look; "but still you shall have it — there! And now guard it well, and be discreet."

Vajdar kissed the hand extended to him and retired. The fair Cyrene turned again toward the stage and joined in the applause. One might have thought she was applauding the prima-donna; but no, she was applauding herself.

Benjamin Vajdar returned home, left the police officer quartered in his antechamber, and, with his servant's aid, began packing his trunks. After that task was accomplished he waited impatiently for the close of the opera and Rozina's return. When his watch told him that he must have waited long enough, he passed noiselessly through the secret passage and opened the mysterious door in the tall clock at its farther end. The marchioness was not there. One hour, two hours, he waited in her boudoir, and still she failed to appear.

"Very well; so be it," said Vajdar to himself. "You thought to outwit me; we shall see which will outwit the other."

With that he opened the little writing-desk and took out the morocco-bound pocketbook which he seemed to know so well where to find. A single glance at its contents satisfied him that the papers he desired were still there. He quickly pocketed his prize and then paused to look around for the last time at the dainty appointments of the luxurious apartment.

"Adieu, beautiful Cyrene, adieu, for ever!" he murmured, a smile of irony on his lips.

Stealthily he had come, stealthily he withdrew. He did not take the trouble to close the writing-desk, but he was careful to leave the little key sticking in the clock door, where its rightful owner would be sure to see it.

He found the police officer still awake and waiting for him. A cab was quickly summoned, and the two started on their journey to Transylvania.

When the Marchioness Caldariva entered her boudoir a little later, her eyes fell at once on her open writing-desk, and she perceived that the morocco pocketbook was gone. She laughed, but it was not a pleasant laugh to hear.

"Very good," said she, half aloud; "you would have it so, and I am not to blame."

Anna Adorjan hovered on the brink of the grave. She had heard that Benjamin Vajdar was charged with a penal offence, and she felt only too well convinced that if such a charge had been brought against him he must be guilty. If guilty, he would be sentenced to a term of imprisonment, and she would never see him return to his old home as she had once so confidently expected. She had nothing now to live for. Her dear brother Manasseh was restored to his family, and she was ready to die.

"Brother," she gently entreated, as she lay on her bed of pain, "if he should by any chance ever come back to us, promise me to treat him as you would if I were still here. You will promise me that, won't you?"

A silent nod of Manasseh's bowed head was her sufficient assurance that her slightest wish would be respected.

"And even though he may never come back, I wish you to make my resting-place in the rocks large enough for two. Perhaps he will return sometime, when he sees his life drawing to a close, and he may be glad to find a place ready for him by my side. You will do as I wish in this matter, brother Manasseh, will you not?"

Another nod of the bowed head.

The prediction uttered by Manasseh, when his enemy lay in his power in the desolate church at St. George, was completely fulfilled. Though he would have infinitely preferred banishment to Siberia, Benjamin Vajdar was forced to return to Toroczko, to the very house where he had been reared, and there take up his abode as a state prisoner. The government made him a pitiful allowance of three hundred florins a year, to keep him from starving.

Thus it was, too, that Anna's words came true, and the man despised and rejected of all the world sought refuge in the house where he had been tenderly nurtured as a child. Thus did he return, vanquished in life's battle, to have his wounds bound by the hands of those he had so grievously wronged, and to beg a place in that family circle into which he had done his utmost to bring sorrow and despair.

Manasseh met the police officer at the door, and heard his announcement with perfect composure.

"We have no objection to raise," said he, "against the decree of the government. Benjamin Vajdar was formerly a member of our family, and so we must provide for him. The state allowance of twenty-five florins a month we beg leave to refuse. In our iron works there is a bookkeeper's position open to this man, and we shall ask him to assume its duties. Indeed, we shall ourselves probably be the gainers by this arrangement, as the keeping of our books has become too heavy a burden for my wife, and she will be glad to be relieved. But enough of this at present; to-morrow we will discuss the matter more at length. Meanwhile Mr. Vajdar is welcome to our house."

Benjamin Vajdar's emotions can better be imagined than described. To find himself called upon to lighten Blanka Zboroy's duties and to live in constant sight of her happy home life, after all he had done in the vain attempt to spoil that life, was more than he had counted on. He bit his compressed lips till the blood ran. Opening the door of the chamber into which he had been ushered, he hurried out to seek the freedom of the open air and to set his confused thoughts in order. On his way his attention was caught by an unexpected sight. Through an open door he had a full view of a bier, on which rested a coffin, and in the latter, with hands folded on her bosom, lay the woman he had most cruelly wronged. In those clasped hands he saw a little picture wreathed in evergreen, — his own likeness, which the dead girl had begged her family to bury with her. Now, if never before, the unhappy man saw what a wealth of love he had cast aside, a love that, even in death caused by his base desertion, could forgive him his perfidy and carry his picture in a fond embrace down to the grave. As his guardian angel, she would bear it with her up to God's throne, and there plead his cause. Overcome at last by a flood of anguish and remorse, the guilty man cried aloud in his despair and fell prostrate beside the coffin, striking his head on its corner as he sank unconscious to the floor.

Manasseh found him there and bore him back to his room. After putting him to bed and ministering to his wants, he went out with Aaron to prepare Anna's grave.

"We must make it wide enough for two," said he; "it was her wish."

When, after several hours of hard work, the two brothers returned home, Manasseh went at once to his guest's room. Before his marriage this chamber had been occupied by him, and he still used it occasionally for writing. In his absence Vajdar had risen and seated himself at the desk. Searching the drawer for writing-materials, he had come upon a sheet of paper yellow with age, and written upon in ink now much faded. The document proved to be a promissory note, but the signature was so heavily scored through and through as to be hardly legible. Benjamin Vajdar started violently as he took up the faded sheet and saw that the man whom he had so feared and hated had, by his own voluntary act, disarmed himself and put it out of his power to punish the fraud practised upon him by his false friend. As if distrusting his own constancy and the binding force of his promise to his sister, Manasseh had, with a few strokes of his pen, rendered harmless what could otherwise have been used as incriminating evidence against the forger.

On entering the room, Manasseh detected a peculiar odour in the air. Benjamin Vajdar sat at the writing-desk, a morocco pocketbook open before him. A half-finished letter lay under the writer's hand, but his pen had ceased to move. His eyes met those of his host with a dull stare.

"Don't come near me!" he cried, in warning. "Death is in this room!"

But Manasseh hurried to the window, threw it open, and then, snatching up the pocketbook and the papers scattered over the desk, cast them all into the fire that was burning on the hearth. Thus all the tell-tale documents relating to certain fraudulent army contracts went up in smoke, but not before they had done their deadly work on one, at least, of the guilty men involved. Those papers had passed through the hands of a second Lucretia Borgia, and not without reason had she applauded herself that night at the opera when she permitted her dupe to extort from her the little key which she wore in her bosom.

Many years of untroubled peace and happiness for the Adorjan family followed these events. The children and grandchildren born to Manasseh and Blanka grew up to call them blessed, the labours of the Toroczko miners and iron-workers were prospered, and Heaven still smiles on the humble homes of that happy valley.

THE END.

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